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• **SATAN RODS THIS
ROUNDUP!**

by **WALT COBURN**



• **WAGONS TO
NOWHERE**

by **TOM ROAN**

• **THE BAKE
OVEN
RUCKUS**

by **THOMAS
THOMPSON**

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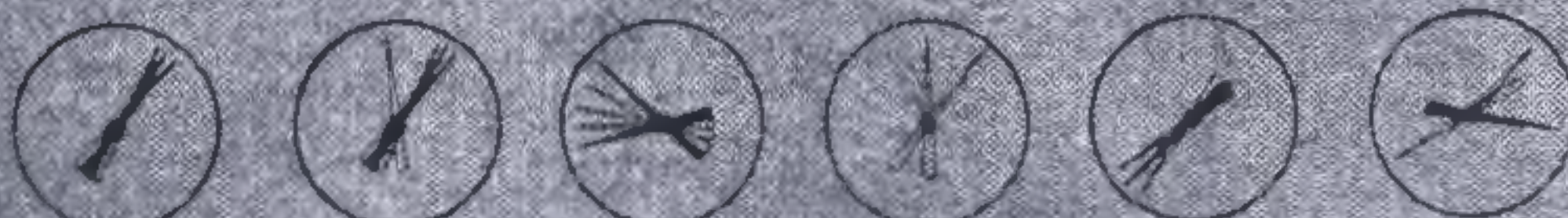
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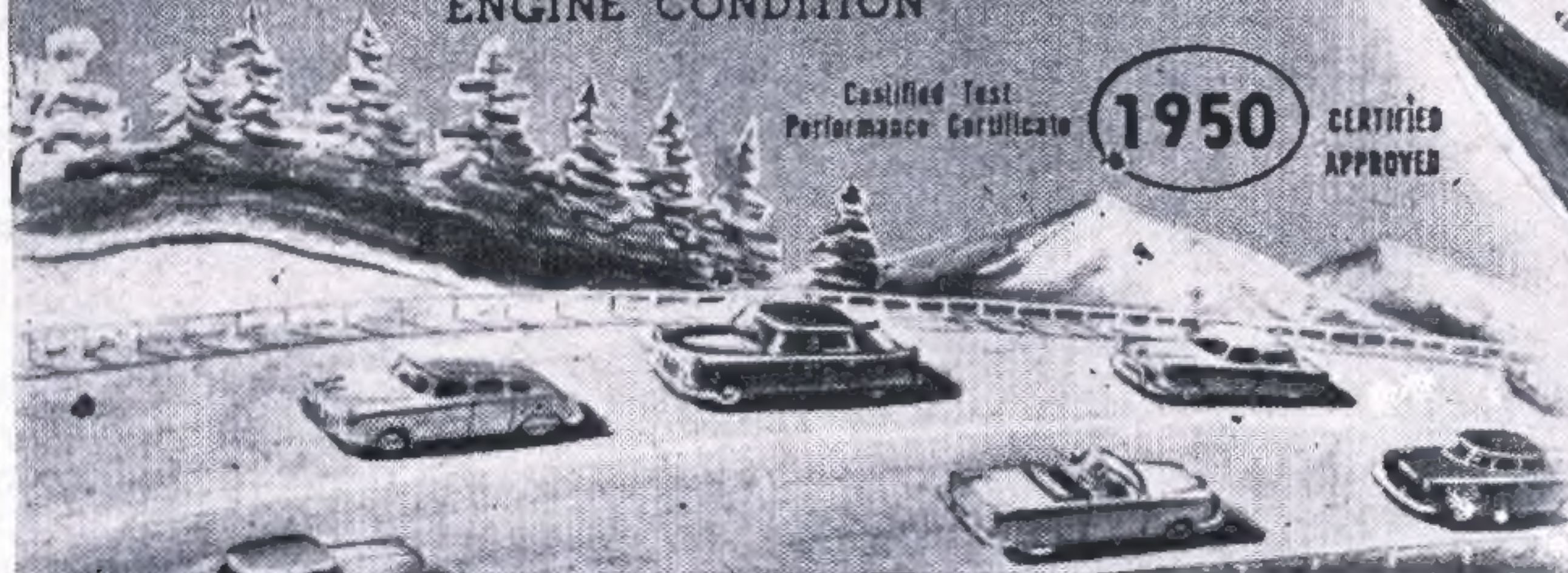
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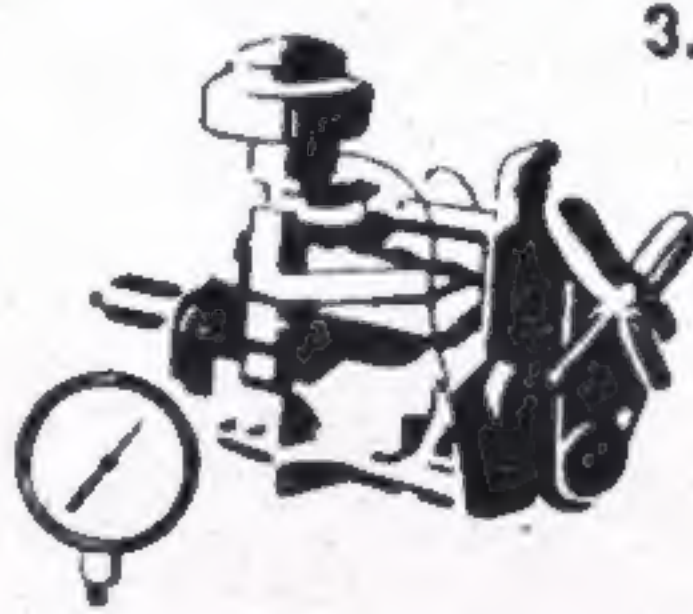
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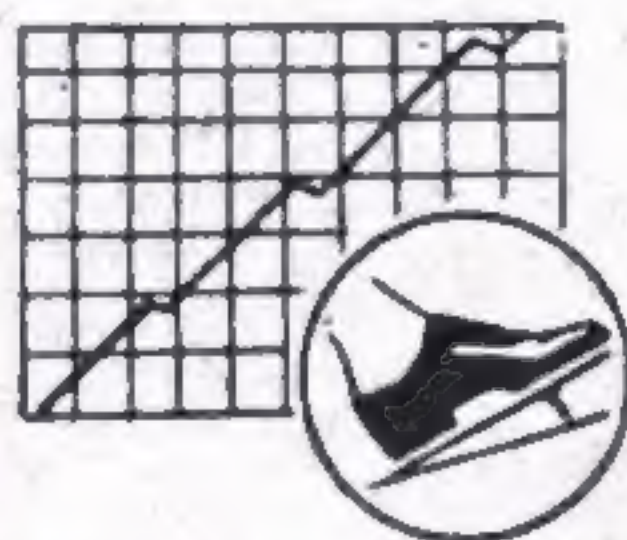
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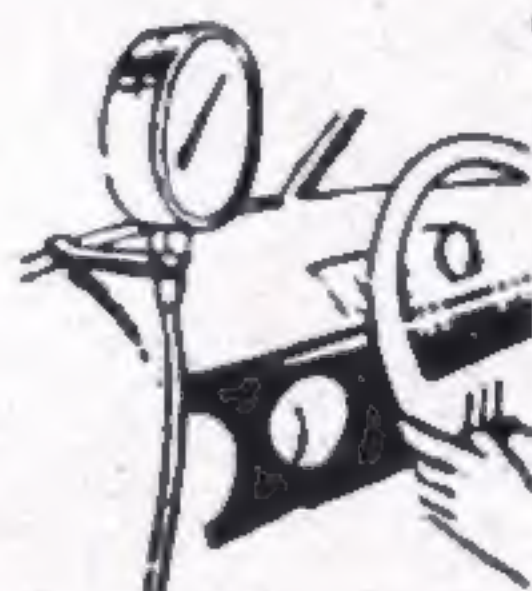
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WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE
TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S
ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

IT'S MY BROTHER!
HE'S HURT ON A
LITTLE ISLAND
UPSTREAM.



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GOING! SUNSET'S
ONLY AN HOUR
OFF!

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SPRAIN, I
GUESS, BUT
I CAN'T
WALK



...AND I
CAN'T
CARRY
HIM

WE'D BETTER
GET ASHORE
FAST. IT'LL
BE DARK
SOON



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MAKE OUR PATIENT
COMFORTABLE, I'LL
HIKE DOWN AND
GET MY CAR.



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DOC PETERS IS
COMING AFTER
SUPPER. WON'T
YOU STAY AND
SHARE OUR
TROUT?

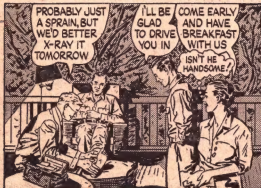
THANK YOU,
YES! BUT WITH
THIS BEARD
I MUST LOOK
LIKE A
TRAMP

USE MY
RAZOR.
IF YOU'D
LIKE TO
SHAVE



THESE ARE
THE SLICKEST-
SHAVING BLADES
I'VE EVER RUN
ACROSS. MY FACE
FEELS GREAT!

SOLD ON THIN
GILLETTES,
EH? WELL,
THEY'RE
PLENTY
KEEN

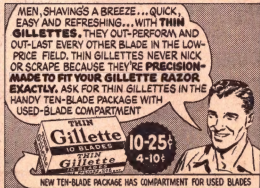


PROBABLY JUST A
SPRAIN, BUT
WE'D BETTER
X-RAY IT
TOMORROW

I'LL BE
GLAD
TO DRIVE
YOU IN

COME EARLY
AND HAVE
BREAKFAST
WITH US

ISN'T HE
HANDSOME?



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
AUGUST 3RD



VOLUME 44

AUGUST, 1951

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BUFFALO BILL'S BOSS

— By DAVID A. WEISS —

IT ISN'T for nothing that Winchester's famous '73 model is called "the rifle that won the West." The lever-action repeating rifle is said to have accounted for more redskins, whitemen, and buffalo than any other gun. Such a part in the saga of the West did it play that the word *Winchester* is now a part of our language. *Webster's Dictionary* lists it as a synonym for repeating rifle.

Everyone from Sitting Bull to Calamity Jane has been photographed holding this celebrated rifle. Many a Frederick Remington painting of the West shows grim frontiersmen fighting off Indians with a Winchester 73.

Although these guns were chiefly used in the West, they saw service in every other part of the world. Prospectors carried them all over Alaska while looking for gold. They were used in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. Hundreds of Russian soldiers were slain at Plevna attempting to cross a plain covered by Turkish marksmen armed with Winchesters.

The most famous person to use the Winchester 73 was William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill). In fact, the gun is often referred to as the "Buffalo Bill" rifle. The renowned scout and hunter—he once killed 4,280 buffalo in eight months—called this rifle "the boss." Many times he told how it saved his life. A wounded bear he had crippled in the Black Hills suddenly charged him from a distance of not more than 30 feet away. Buffalo Bill pulled the trigger of his Winchester eleven times before the animal finally dropped at his feet. "Had I not had a repeating rifle," he said, "I would undoubtedly be in the happy hunting grounds."

Another great Western hunter who used the Winchester 73 was Buffalo "Charles T." Jones. He had a standing challenge he could kill more antelope in a day than any other man in the world. Jones could kill two or three with the same bullet. His fellow hunters claimed his Winchester poured lead into antelopes so fast it sounded like a volley of musketry.

There wasn't any type of wild game that didn't feel the sting of a Winchester cartridge. Theodore Roosevelt reported the stuffed moose hanging in Washington's Smithsonian Institute was shot by one. It was the American buffalo who really suffered. The repeating rifle practically exterminated them. An estimated hundred million were killed in one twenty-five year period.

Buffalo Bill said an Indian would give more for a Winchester than any other gun. The redmen were willing to trade anything for it, even their horse. Thousands of guns were sold to the various Indian tribes during the 1870's by government Indian agencies. The usual price was \$100 worth of buffalo and bear hides. A few Indian chiefs got them in Washington. One chieftain, after paying his respects to the Great White Father, refused to go home unless he and every brave in his retinue was presented a Winchester rifle.

Selling and giving these rifles to the Indians was a tragic mistake. Sometimes the redmen ended up far better armed than the U. S. Cavalry sent out to subdue them. The climax came in 1876. Almost half of the estimated 5,000 Sioux and Cheyennes in the Battle of the Little Big Horn were armed with Winchester repeating rifles. General Custer and his valiant band of 200 men had only single-shot Springfield. In the massacre that followed, many of the cavalymen never got a chance to fire more than one shot.

No more Indians race across the plains. No more buffalo, either. The Winchester Company is now engaged in meeting the requirements of a new age. The production lines of it and its associated companies turned out over seven billion cartridges for World War II. It also manufactured a half million Garand rifles. When it designed and completed the .30 M-1 carbine in 13 days, it made the record of designing a military weapon in the shortest time in history. Even so, the company will always be remembered for the Winchester 73—The Rifle That Won the West.

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HANGMAN'S HERITAGE

By DENNISON RUST

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OLD Buck Apperson, owner of the 88 brand in Hurricane Valley, grunted, shifted his gun around a little closer to his gnarled right hand. His high-heeled boot dug a little deeper in the dirt floor of Arkansaw Givney's tool shed, disclosing a green cowhide. On the skin side, very clearly, he saw his own brand.

It was characteristic of the leather-faced old rancher to have said nothing about his visit to the Givney ranch house that early morning. No use running a man down with suspicions, stirring up a lot of talk, unless you were sure. And now he was plenty sure!

Shortly after sunset the gangling Arkansaw Givney slouched into the cabin with his kid, Ott. He looked as if he were hung together by the same baling wire that he used to mend his little ranch house. His dank graying hair fell over his eyes as he swore. "Looks like somebody's been nosin' around hyear, Ott. What you reckon—?"

He turned out to the tool shed, his face strangely sallow beneath the stubble of whiskers. Ott, his gray eyes frowning, turned after him. At his heels came the flop-eared houn' dawg, Ribs.

It looked all right out there, but a man could never tell. There was somethin' in the wind—and Arkansaw Givney, worthless, shiftless squatter, sat hunched on the edge of his unmade cot, his .45-70 over his knees. He waited there in the dark, and crouching near him, big-eyed, troubled, was his kid.

There was only the soothing hush of the night wind, the call of a whippoorwill, the soft regular thump-thump of the houn' dawg's tail.

"Shet up that damn' cur," whispered Arkansaw.

The kid leaned over, patted the dog's soft head. He felt funny—strangely prickly down his spine. He said, "Ralph Apperson stuck up for me yesterday, Paw, when the men were kickin' me around. They swore we was stealin' cows."

"Hell with 'em all!" the man snarled.

The kid sighed. "Gosh, if we could only stay here a spell! It's good land—you could start a right nice spread here. The neighbors is good folks, too. This is more of a home than we ever had."

The flat of the man's hand knocked the kid's head backward. He sobbed a couple of times, muffled, spasmodic sounds of bitterness and grief.

Outside, men were riding into the yard, dismounting. There came a shout. "Givney, come out with your hands high. We want you!"

"Come an' git me!" yelled Arkansaw Givney, and shot twice through the thin door. A man gurgled an oath, slumped to the ground. Givney flattened himself near a window, drew the kid down with him. Shots whistled through the window, tore through the thin sides of the building. The kid, Ott Givney, his grief for the moment forgotten, helped his father, loaded the guns, fired the old .44 himself at a moving shadow stalking close. For two hours the battle continued. And then, Arkansaw Givney, wounded, half-delirious with pain, pushed out a soiled white rag on a stick.

They made short work of Arkansaw. A rope was thrown over a nearby cottonwood limb. Arkansaw's heels danced emptily on

(Please continue on page 10)

**The Hurricane Kid was back and all the valley knew—
old Givney's brat would keep his bloody promise!**

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(Continued from page 8)

air with curses still on his lips. The kid shuddered once, his cold, sweat-damp palm still clamped on the gun-butt, and started to worm his way very stealthily from the shack.

A man's voice hallowed his discovery. But the man misjudged the distance and felt the cold muzzle of young Ott Givney's gun against his belly.

"I'm ridin'," the kid sobbed. "An' I'll live to see every man in the Hurricane burn in hell!"

He was gone, and the blackness swallowed his final hoofbeats.

TWO—five years passed. The tumble-down ranch house became a line-camp for the 88. The kid, it seemed, had dropped from sight until word came that a gunny calling himself the Hurricane Kid was gathering himself a reputation for the most ruthless Colt-man in that part of the Southwest. Sometimes he rode with the law; sometimes—according to whispers—he rode against it. And his trail was strewn with the bodies of those who had taken up his gun-boast and lost.

Perilous times in the Hurricane valley now. Red war clouds hovered over its once peaceable grazing land and comfortable spreads. By might of guns and crooked lawyers, Big Franzen was working his way into the valley holdings, wiping out the small ranchers who stood in his path.

Young Ralph Apperson, heading the 88 spread, gathered about him the Hurricane men for the final stand-off. Big Franzen's riders were going to sweep into the town of Hurricane, stuff the ballot-boxes, grab hold of the county officers. And Big Franzen's gunnies would make sure with six-gun and rifle that that election would be a landslide. Apperson's men knew what small chance they'd have against the powerful, greedy invader.

Morning dawned, with a red sun foretelling a bloody day. The valley men were crowded into town, grim-faced, their hats aslant, their guns ready. A rider sloped down from the hills to tell of a cavalcade he had sighted—fifty or more fighters hitting hell for leather, heading for town.

You could hear the jingle of harness, it was so still, above the steady thudding of hooves, as the fighters of Big Franzen

swept into town. Not a valley man showed himself as the men stiffly dismounted before the courthouse. For a moment they were gathered together about a gaunt-faced youngster with tied down holsters sagging on his thighs. In quiet tones he gave the orders. Riflemen above the bank squinted along their gun-muzzles. And then a strange thing happened.

A houn' dawg, sunning itself in the street, lazily sauntered over to the young gunman. The Hurricane Kid looked down at it a moment, and to this day men swear that something seemed to soften in his grim, bitter face as his hand reached down to pet the dog. The leader turned to the gun-hirelings and began to talk, but his voice was so low that no one heard what he said. It was an argument—a hot one, too. Suddenly, through that tension, came the crack of a gun. The Hurricane Kid was fighting his own men!

No one yet knows who set that spark to the powder magazine that was Hurricane on that day. Guns ripped through the silence. Two of Franzen's men fell squirming in their death agony. The hidden marksmen were getting in their deadly work. But Franzen's killers knew how to combat that. Under cover of the fighting, a group of them worked their way around to take the valley men from the rear. Young Apperson fell with a slug through his chest. Others, too, gunned their last that day.

Three were holding out, fortified up on the roof of the jail. The killers held off for a moment, then a go-devil of flaming brushwood was started for the building from the nearby hillside. It had almost reached the wooden jailhouse when one man, powder-blackened, blood-soaked, streaked from the jailhouse. He flung himself straight into the path of that flaming go-devil. He struggled with it one tense moment, managed to turn it. And he lay there, his guns spewing lead at the last of the Franzen gunnies.

Startled oaths of amazement came from the few remaining Valley defenders. "The Hurricane Kid—Givney's kid!"

The Kid smiled tiredly. "Yeah. I come back to see that you all burn in hell, like I said I would. But a man can't do that to his own home folks. . . ."

The tail of Ribs, the old houn' dawg, thumped the dirt near Ott Givney's blood-stained boots.

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BORN for WAR

By JOHN CLARK

THE chief occupation of the Comanches was making war. So energetically did they pursue this course, their history doesn't include a period of peace. They fought the Spaniards for 200 years, waged war against the Texans and Americans for 50 years, and in between times battled the neighboring Apaches and Kiowas.

They expected no quarter in war and gave none. Their war parties raided the Mexican border for hundreds of years, and the pattern was always the same. Tomahawks flashing, voices shrieking, they would swoop down on the defending party. The men were scalped, horses stolen, goods plundered, and women and children kidnapped.

In recruiting warriors for these raids, the Comanches didn't have to resort to compulsory military training. They simply started a war dance. Waving war lances, shuffling feet, warriors in war paint started dancing up and down through the Comanche camp. This was continued until a full complement of volunteers was obtained. A brave never went against his will.

Usually men weren't taken prisoners by the Comanches. They were killed and scalped. The belief was that scalped men couldn't go to heaven and the Comanches wanted to make sure their enemies ended up in the lower world. Women were seldom scalped because the redmen didn't consider them having souls. But sometimes a Comanche couldn't resist, particularly when the victim had long blonde tresses.

Most of the women kidnapped by the Comanches were Mexicans. But that didn't mean the Indians weren't susceptible to the charms of a pretty white woman. Many such women abducted in the 1800's along the frontier ended up as squaws in a warrior's teepee. One vivacious brunette named Mrs. Luster spent a month living as a chief's wife.

The Comanches seldom murdered children. They preferred kidnapping them and taking them into the tribe to replace slain warriors. One full-blooded Mexican ab-

ducted at an early age grew up to be a Comanche chief. Hundreds of American boys were kidnapped. At least a dozen wrote books about their experiences in Comanche camps.

The most famous frontier kidnapping was that of Cynthia Ann Parker. Only nine years old when captured by the Comanches in 1836, she wasn't returned until 24 years later. During this time she had become wife of a Comanche chief and had borne him two sons. One was Quanah, the last great Comanche chief.

In later years, when the white men began encroaching more and more on Comanche territory, the Indians began taking captives and torturing them. A favorite punishment was to take the victim, strip him, and tie him face-up to stakes, letting the hot sun burn his flesh and blind his eyes. On other occasions warriors would line up with clubs facing one another and force the captives to run through their ranks. A prisoner seldom got ten yards before being clubbed senseless.

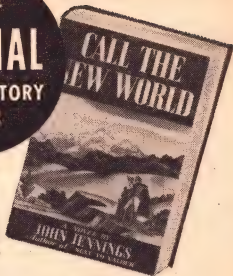
For a time the Comanches couldn't be stopped. They seldom attacked any force stronger than their own, and on their fast mustangs they were able to run away from any military group set against them. Even the whitemen's guns weren't much of an advantage over their iron-tipped arrows, for they had shields of buffalo hide so tough they could deflect bullets.

Concerted efforts on the part of cowboys and Texas rangers began taking their toll in the late 19th century. The Comanches feared these adversaries more than the U. S. Army. By the time the Army cut through its red-tape to start after the Indians, they were usually a hundred miles away.

"One Comanche chief explained this when he tried to trade some horses to an Army officer in exchange for a mounted cannon. The officer refused, saying the Indians probably would use the cannon to kill American soldiers. "No," the Indian replied, "We use cannon to shoot cowboys. We kill soldiers with clubs."



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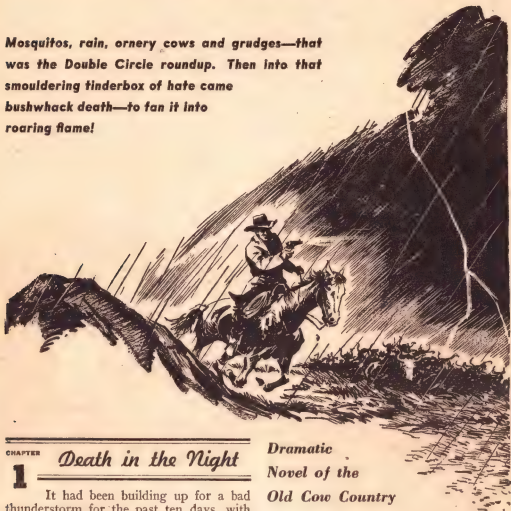
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SATAN RODS

Mosquitos, rain, ornery cows and grudges—that was the Double Circle roundup. Then into that smouldering tinderbox of hate came bushwhack death—to fan it into roaring flame!



CHAPTER

1

Death in the Night

**Dramatic
Novel of the
Old Cow Country**

It had been building up for a bad thunderstorm for the past ten days, with the humidity getting denser each day and the sheet lightning playing of an evening across the sky like a postponed threat of disaster.

But Oklahoma Kane, ramrod of the Double Circle, refused to heed the warning. He had blindfolded himself to a lot of things that had piled up since he had horned old Jess Warner out of the job as ramrod and wagon boss for the big Double Circle outfit. It looked as if Kane were going out of his way to make a lot of enemies and to get the outfit all riled up to where every man had a chip on his shoulder.

He had started the roundup two weeks

earlier than any other cow outfit in that part of Montana. Maybe he figured it would take him that much longer to get over the route because he did not know the country and was too stubborn and independent to ask one of the older hands to pilot him when he led circle of an early morning.

They rode forty-mile circles, returning to camp on leg-weary, played-out horses. Now and then a cowhand would lead his horse in the last few miles, and the wild world knows how a cowpuncher hates walking.

The mosquitoes were bad. Horseflies and

THIS ROUNDUP!—

"The bullet hit Fox, kinda jerking him in the saddle."

By
**WALT
COBURN**



deerflies had gotten a taste of human blood and liked it. The heelflies were hell on the cattle and horses, goading the horses in the remuda to run for some high point where they would stand head to rump, swishing tails in what little breeze stirred. The heelflies ran the tallow off the beef. The mosquitoes got in under the netting the cowpunchers wore tied around their hat

crowns and fastened down around their necks. The nighthawk claimed the mosquitoes drilled holes in the netting to get through. One cowhand claimed they drilled holes through his bed tarp, and that the females laid eggs in his soogans and the males bored holes in his hide.

Kane camped at Gyp Spring without knowing it was bad water. Every man came down with what Greasy Dan, the roundup cook, called the howling dysentery.

Now they were camped on Tule Lake, where all the mosquitoes in the world were

bred. And even a sheepherder would have sense enough to know that a herd of big native four-year-old steers would never lay on the bedground that night.

Old Jess Warner had stayed on with the Double Circle as beef boss. He knew better than to ask the wagon boss to double the guard. They claim the older a man gets the less sleep he requires. But Jess Warner was overdoing it. His bedroll had not been spread out for a week. It was still in the wagon. He would get a couple of hours rest, lazing in the shade of his horse on day herd, and that was all he got. He went out on cocktail guard to bed the herd and stayed out there until the day herders relieved last guard. And like as not Kane would be moving camp and all the break-fast the old grizzled beef boss would get was a change of horses. It looked like Oklahoma Kane was pouring it on the old man in hopes he would quit. But Jess Warner did not know the meaning of the word.

The first thunderheads rolled up across the broken badlands skyline at supper time. Jess squinted a blue eye at the big white, gray-edged clouds and told the Windy Kid and Dingo Yates the storm would hit about the time they went on third guard.

And it did.

THE only way the Windy Kid and Dingo Yates found their way from camp in the pitch darkness to the herd about a mile distant, was by the heat lightning flashes.

The Windy Kid pointed to a rider who had left camp while they were getting their night horses off the picket ropes. He was putting on his slicker as he rode on ahead.

"Don't tell me that's Oklahoma Kane gittin' worried about the cattle!" said the Windy Kid.

"That's Fox," Dingo Yates said flatly.

Dingo was sparing with his words. A stretch in the pen for cattle rustling had left him all the more silent.

Even the Windy Kid, mouthy as he was, had sense enough to let it go at that. He was trying to build up a name for toughness and he used Dingo Yates for a pattern.

Fox had showed up that evening to rep for the 7 Dash outfit across the Missouri River. He had run the 7 Dash wagon before he'd managed for a stock detective job. When that cushy job with the Cattlemen's Association had played out, Fox had gone

back to the 7 Dash. They had sent him to represent them when the Double Circle began their roundup two weeks early, in violation of the agreement between the big outfits, which had become an unwritten law, that they all start the roundup on a certain date. Kane's early start had roused suspicion on the part of the 7 Dash, so they set Fox out for a rep. There was an unfounded rumor that Fox had never turned in his law badge.

Not that it made any difference to Oklahoma Kane. He stood there on his long legs, a slanted hat pulled down on his red head and his pale gray eyes looking Fox over as the 7 Dash man rode up at supper time with his bed horse and string of cow horses.

Fox looked puny by comparison to the six-foot Kane. He was a weasel-eyed man with a thin nose and pointed jaw and a mouth like a steel trap. He was one of the best all-around cowhands in the country. He was posted on every brand, and he did not have to use clippers to read a worked brand. He was hated and feared and respected, in that order. He wanted no man for a friend. His beady eyes looked at Kane, who was building up a rep for going out of his way to make men dislike him.

"Don't expect no favors from me," Kane told Fox at the start. "When it comes your turn, you go on day herd, and you'll stand two hours guard of a night. When you rep with my wagon, you take my orders or cut your string. Ketch your night horse. You're on last guard."

Fox said nothing. He turned and shook hands with Jess Warner. Kane and every man in the outfit who was in camp at the time, saw Fox take an envelope from his chaps' pocket and openly hand it to Jess Warner. Jess squinted his blue eyes at his name on the envelope and shoved it into his pocket.

The Windy Kid, who always managed somehow to sit near his tin god Dingo Yates, saw Dingo's opaque black eyes narrow when Fox looked his way. Their eyes met and held and slid away. Neither man spoke, nor nodded. But the Windy Kid knew that it had been the damaging testimony of Stock Detective Fox that had sent Dingo to the pen five years ago, to do a fifteen-year stretch. Even with time off for good behavior, Dingo would not or-

dinarily have gotten out so soon, but he had managed for a parole from the Montana State Prison in the Deer Lodge Valley. As far as the close-mouthed Dingo Yates was concerned now, it was a closed chapter in his book.

It was raining before they reached the herd, and the storm was almost on top of them. The skyline stayed an almost continuous sheet of flame and the thunder crashed up out of the badlands and rolled across the open prairie. Now and then chain lightning split the sky and the thunder clap smashed down. Fox fire ran along the top of the high wet grass, and it seemed to the Windy Kid like they were riding through a lake of fire to get to the herd. He could see the fireballs on the tips of the horns where a thousand head of steers had commenced moving. It looked scary.

The Windy Kid opened his mouth to make a comment to Dingo, but something in the man's lean face and the look in his eyes stopped the Kid. He took up the slack in his jaw while he pulled on his yellow saddle slicker.

They met Jess Warner as they reached the herd. He was bawling to the men coming off second guard, "Wake up Oklahoma Kane and every man in camp and get 'em out here if he expects to hold this herd till daybreak!" They nodded as they rode past, at a long lope without pulling up.

The Windy Kid saw Fox as he rode around the herd and out of sight.

Jess Warner looked old and gray faced, humped over the saddle horn. He had no slicker on and he was soaked to the hide.

"You fellers split up," Jess said. "The cattle will walk-bawl till they bog down in their weary tracks. Ride up on the swing and keep throwin' back the bunch-quitters. I'll fetch up the drags. You keep far enough off to the side, Kid. I don't want you to git a good horse tromped down if the cattle take a notion to run. Who was that third feller I just saw, Dingo?"

"Fox," Dingo was unbuttoning his slicker.

"The hell!"

"Mebbyso he figgers a worked brand shows up on a wet hide by lightnin' light." Dingo got an arm out of his slicker. "Hold on, Jess. Take my slicker, before you ketch rheumatiz."

"Serves me right. I should a bought one.

But it was sunshine when I was in town and a quart come cheaper. Keep your slicker on, Dingo."

The Windy Kid beat Dingo to it. He tossed his wet yellow slicker across the horn of Jess Warner's saddle and rode off, singing in a loud, off-key voice. Jess grinned after him, shaking his head.

"That bellerin' is all them steers needs to stompede," said old Jess. But he put on the Kid's slicker, and added quietly, "They could come worse than the Windy Kid."

"I ain't run into one so far," Dingo said as he rode off into the black rain.

The Windy Kid had gotten on Dingo's nerves, following him around like a coon dog.

IT WAS not like Dingo Yates to talk that way about any man, and Jess Warner puzzled over it as he buttoned the slicker over his wet hide. It must have been Fox that Dingo had in mind. But even so, Dingo Yates had spoken out of turn. Coming from any other man, old Jess would have thought nothing of it, but Dingo was a man who never expressed his feelings. If he hated a man he kept quiet about it, until the sign was right. Then he whipped him. And he never said anything about it, before or afterwards.

Oklahoma Kane was another story. He would tell a man he was going to tromp his guts out, and then get the job done, and brag about it forever after.

But grizzled Jess Warner was too busy with his own problems to bother his mind about it now. The beef herd that he had nursed along, grazing them scattered at a slow walk, grazing them onto the bed ground of an evening and grazing them off early the next morning, was going to lose all the pounds of tallow he had put on their ribs. The ground the big native four-year-old steers had tromped over was soft and boggy now, and it was a little heart-breaking to know that they would lose their tallow sloshing through the mud.

Maybe if the whole crew had been out at the herd with enough men to hold them up, Jess could have kept some of that fat on. Barring a run. If something stampeded the herd, that was an act of God that no man on earth could help.

Jess Warner was crowding sixty-five, and he had taken for granted his ramrod

job with the Double Circle as long as he lived. When they had sent Oklahoma Kane, a rank stranger in a strange land, to take his place, it had been a gut shot. He was told that he was too old now for the job. What the outfit needed was a younger, more aggressive ramrod.

Jess Warner did not give much of a damn tonight. He was soaked to the hide, and twinges of pain were commencing to shoot through the old knots left by broken bones that he had gotten working for the Double Circle. He had been no older than the slim, towheaded, pug-nosed, blue-eyed Windy Kid when he had followed the drags of the first trail herd the Double Circle brought north from Texas.

Jess had stayed in Montana, to try out the climate, and had never gone back. There was nothing for him to go back to. No kinfolks left, no home. That was why he had hired the Windy Kid when the eighteen-year-old cowboy had tackled him for a job. Jess knew what it was to be a wind-bellied orphan. He had put the Windy Kid on as horse wrangler. When he turned out to be a natural at handling a green colt, Jess handed him the rough string. The Kid was still riding the rough string for the Double Circle.

Dingo Yates had worked for the Double Circle off and on for years, like he had worked for every big outfit in Montana. He had his own little outfit on the Missouri River. Or did have, until he got arrested for not being able to produce the hide to go with the beef he had butchered and hung in his ice house.

Stock Detective Fox had found a hide with the brand cut out buried under the butt of an old haystack. The law had sent Dingo Yates to the pen. He still had the ranch but no cattle left on it. All because he had pleaded guilty to butchering a 7 Dash yearling that would have starved to death if he had not wintered on his hay. He figured he had fed his hay that winter to fifteen or twenty 7 Dash cows and felt he was entitled to butcher the yearling. Dingo Yates was bitter as hell about it. He was still sore at Fox, who had dropped in at Dingo's place just after Dingo had done the butchering, because Fox had done the job the Cattlemen's Association had paid him to do.

Jess Warner shoved his hand into the

pocket of his wet Levi overalls for the letter that Fox had given him when he rode up that evening. When he fished it out, it was suddenly wet and the ink was blurred, but in the next lightning flash Jess could make out the words. Another piece of wet paper was pasted around a hard, flat object; and when Jess's gnarled fingers, shriveled and puckered with the cold rain, peeled the mass off and dropped it on the ground, he held a small nickel-plated law badge in the palm of his hand. It glinted into his eyes when the lightning cracked, so close to Jess he could almost taste sulphur. His eyes were blinded by the glare, and the crash of thunder pounded into his ears. Long after the glare was gone, bright spots of fire filled his eyeballs. He did not recall having shoved the law badge into the pocket of the yellow slicker. And it was only afterwards, going back in his memory, that he dimly recalled the sound of gun shots that blended into the thunder clap that deafened him till his ears rang.

There was only the rumbling crack of the stamped herd that shook the ground like an earthquake, and the pitch-black, rain-soaked night. Jess Warner was too old a cowhand to run down the horse under him, too old and wise with the years he had spent handling cattle.

If he had known for certain the direction, he would have ridden to camp for a cup of coffee. But as it was he followed in the muddy wake of the stampede.

It was Jess Warner who found the dead body of Fox. He recalled the wording of the rain-sodden note wrapped with the law badge.

In case I ride my luck out, pin on this stock detective badge and play my hand out.

It was as if Fox had foreseen his death. And before Jess got off his horse, he knew that this was murder.

CHAPTER

2

Hightail It, Dingo!

The dead man made a gruesome thing to look at, sprawled in the heavy mud, his clothing and the flesh underneath ripped by the cloven hoofs that trampled him as the stampede passed over him.

It was getting daybreak when Jess Warner found him. The brunt of the storm had passed to leave a thin, cold drizzle. The lightning had gone from the sky, leaving it all the more black, and the thunder rolled away in the distance like the beat of muffled drums.

Jess stepped down from his horse and stood there looking down at the dead man. His numb, wet fingers fumbled at the metal buttons of the yellow slicker. He took it off and spread it over Fox, covering his head and face. He shivered a little. It might have been because he was chilled to the bone, but it was more than cold that showed in his squinted blue eyes.

One of the worst fears that always lives with a cowpuncher is the fear of being caught in a cattle stampede. During the years the old cowhand had had some close scrapes with the death he looked down at now. Jess slid the six-shooter from the waistband of his Levis and tilted it skyward and commenced shooting. He spaced the shots and waited for the gun barrel to cool before he shoved it back in his overalls.

He still had the empty gun in his hand when Oklahoma Kane rode up, a black saddle slicker buttoned up around his neck. Jess Warner got back on his horse and Kane rode up alongside him. Kane had a lighted cigarette cupped in his hand and motioned with it.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Fox," said Jess.

"Well, I'll be damned." A twisted grin spread across his wet, red-whiskered face. "Looks like the 7 Dash will have to send out a new rep."

Kane turned to the old beef boss. "Better ride to camp and tell the boys to fetch a wagon sheet and a shovel. The meat tarp will do." His eyes were green as slivers of glass.

"You better let him lay," advised Jess Warner, "until the sheriff and coroner gits out from town."

"I don't see the need for that," Kane said. "Fox got run over by the stompede. I can't hold up the roundup waitin' for ary coroner's inquest."

"You'll have to lay over, regardless," Jess told him. "It'll take a few days to round up the cattle we've spilled during the night."

"I figgered I was runnin' the Double Circle wagon. When I need your advice I'll ask for it. Better ride to camp, like I told you."

The Windy Kid and Dingo Yates rode up on leg-weary horses. The Windy Kid shivered in his saddle as he looked down at what lay under the slicker. His beardless face was pinched with cold and his eyes were rain-washed blue.

Dingo stepped off his horse and reached down and lifted the yellow slicker. He looked at what he saw for a long moment before he laid the slicker back gently and straightened up.

Kane said, "Don't tell me you're goin' to take off your 'hat, Dingo, and shed a tear."

Dingo looked up at Oklahoma Kane and his black eyes were wicked. The grin faded from the red-whiskered face.

"Who found him, Jess?" asked Dingo, looking up at the beef boss.

"Me," said Jess.

"Where's the horse he was ridin'?" asked Dingo.

"Yeah, where is it?" Jess lifted his head and squinted into the gray drizzle. "Must be somewheres not too far off."

"Who—who is he?" The Windy Kid pointed, and sneezed loudly.

"Fox," Dingo spoke sharply. He took the slicker from the dead body and handed it to the Windy Kid. "You need your slicker worse than he does. Put 'er on."

The Windy Kid was still shaking his head as Dingo shoved the slicker into his hands. "It'll break the wind, Kid. This ain't no time to git finicky."

Jess Warner leaned sideways to help the Windy Kid on with the slicker. "You better ride to camp and put on dry duds, son. You're ketchin' cold."

The Windy Kid kept shaking his head. He was staring down at the dead man.

"If you're going to be sick, Kid," said Kane, "ride off a ways."

"Let the Kid alone," Dingo said flatly.

Some of the Double Circle cowpunchers started showing up in answer to Jess Warner's gun signal. Kane had his toadies, his bootlickers, his favorites, and he seemed relieved when they rode up.

"All you men might as well ride to camp. Somebody fetch back the meat tarp and a shovel. We'll plant Fox where he lays."

Kane made a gesture of dismissal. "I'll stay with the carcass till you git back."

Old Jess Warner spoke up with a slow drawl. "I was tellin' Kane he'd better git the sheriff and the coroner out here. A coroner's inquest should set on this dead body before it's buried." He looked at Dingo Yates.

DINGO reached in under his slicker and into his shirt pocket for cigarette makings. He spilled some damp tobacco into the cigarette paper, cupping it with his hands from the drizzle. He rolled it swift and took a round tin cylinder of dry matches from his chaps pocket. The tobacco smoke came out of his nostrils and his voice came through the smoke.

"When a man has the enemies Fox made, he's entitled to it." He cut a hard look at the big red-headed wagon boss. "I wouldn't leave Kane or any other man alone here, Jess. Like as not Fox has a law badge pinned to his undershirt, and a tally book to go with it."

Jess Warner was reminded of the law badge and he commenced searching his pockets. When the search proved futile, he reckoned he must have lost it. He said nothing about having the badge and finally pulled out a gnawed end of a sodden square of tobacco and bit off a chaw, for the benefit of anyone who might have been watching.

Kane's mouth twisted. "Dingo hit the nail on the head. Fer all we know Fox had a bench warrant with Dingo Yates' name on it." His green eyes slid toward Jess. "You claim you found the carcass, Jess. You had plenty of time to go through his pockets before you shot in the air."

Kane's gun slid from under his slicker, and he held it in his hand and his eyes were slitted. "I'm still ramroddin' this outfit," he said in a gritty voice. "And when I give the orders you take 'em! Head for camp!"

Jess and Dingo and the Windy Kid rode off together. Kane kept a couple of his bootlickers with him.

It had settled down now to a steady drizzle. The Windy Kid's teeth were chattering. They met the nighthawk leading Fox's saddled horse by the bridle reins. They looked the 7 Dash gelding over. The horse was leg weary but sound. Not even a faint

limp. They were all thinking the same thing, that the horse showed no signs of having been caught in the stampede. But nobody put it into words.

They were almost to camp when the Windy Kid discovered the law badge in the pocket of the slicker he had loaned Jess. He slipped it to Dingo when they unsaddled. "I don't know how this got in my slicker, Dingo. Nor when," he said.

"You're learnin', Kid." Dingo shoved the law badge into his pants pocket.

The cook wrapped the Windy Kid in heavy red Hudson's Bay blankets and fed him steaming hot drinks spiked with lemon extract.

The cold, steady rain kept up. Kane had sent a man to town for the sheriff and coroner. He left the dead body of Fox where it lay covered by a wagon sheet, with two men on guard. He sent the rest of the outfit to hunt the horses the nighthawk had lost in the storm.

Jess Warner and Dingo Yates brought Fox's bedroll into the mess tent. They had riveted down the wide leather bed straps. "You set on it, son," Jess told the Windy Kid.

Roundup cooks are proverbially cranky, and Greasy Dan was no exception. None of the cowpunchers was allowed to come into his mess tent, except Jess Warner. It was all right with Greasy Dan if Jess brought in the Windy Kid.

Oklahoma Kane led his men on circle to round up the strayed horses. But he slipped back to camp, and when he found Jess and the Windy Kid in the mess tent playing checkers, he stood there scowling, looking in under the canvas fly that led from the mess wagon to the mess tent. The Windy Kid had a quarter segment of dried apple pie in his hand.

"Looks to me like you're throwin' off, Mouthy," Kane said to the Windy Kid. "You go on horse guard with Dingo. Third guard." Then he fixed his green-eyed stare on old Jess Warner. "Lemme have a look at that gun of yourn, Warner," he said.

Jess pulled out his gun and ejected the six empty shells on the dirt floor of the tent. Then he re-loaded the gun from a box of forty-five cartridges the cook kept in the tent.

"You're lookin' at 'er, Kane," Jess

drawled. His eyes were puckered, bright and blue and cold as a winter sky.

The big red-whiskered wagon boss was breathing heavily through his nose. He turned and walked out into the rain and headed for the bed tent.

The Windy Kid sneezed and puckered his lips in a soundless whistle. "I don't git the drift, Jess."

Jess's gray-whiskered face looked grim. "You will, son, when the coroner's inquest sets on the dead body of Fox. He was shot in the back before the cattle tromped him into the mud."

The outfit began to divide into camps. The reps formed a tight clique of their own. Kane kept his half dozen men within easy call. Jess Warner and Dingo Yates and the Windy Kid kept to themselves.

The bulk of the scattered horses had been rounded up, and the horse wrangler and a couple of Double Circle cowhands were loose-herding and grazing them. The rest of the outfit were in the bed tent with a fire going in the old Sibley army stove, and the steam from their drying clothes mingled with tobacco smoke.

Until after the coroner's inquest, and until the steady rain let up, there was no use wasting time gathering the spilled beef herd. "Let them spread out and graze," said beef boss Jess. "We'd only knock taller off 'em gatherin' 'em, and no herd is going to lie on a muddy bedground."

They had spent the morning playing cards and shooting craps, and the Windy Kid got the cook into a game of mumble-peg. Jess Warner and Dingo Yates straddled Fox's bedroll with the checkerboard between them. While they waited for the sheriff and coroner, they grouped off, talking it over in guarded tones. Every man in camp knew that Fox had been shot in the back and left to lie there for the cattle to trample, while his spooked horse stampeded into the night, headed for the remynda. Before long, each man had his own opinion about the murder, but each man kept his own theory to himself or shared it in close secret with his own tight group.

Greasy Dan glared at the whole outfit while they lined up and filled tin plates and cups, with one eye on the battered old alarm clock on the mess box that ticked off the

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hours until the sheriff and the coroner would get there. He was wasp tempered and vitriolic of tongue.

"You wanta know how Fox got killed?" he snarled at them. "That damned stock detective slept with his law badge in his mouth fer fear somebody'd find it on him. He swallowed it in his sleep, and when the points of the star got to cutting his innards, he couldn't stand the pain no longer and shot hisself. Any man that claims different is a liar!" He banged down the heavy meat cleaver in the meat block.

THE sheriff and coroner got to the roundup camp late that afternoon. The coroner owned the feed and livery barn, and when he had bought a second-hand hearse, the cowtown had elected him coroner. The sheriff owned the First and Last Chance Saloon. They came out in the coroner's new top buggy hitched to his stoutest team because the mud was heavy going. It was nearing election time, and the sheriff had a box of five-cent cigars and a gallon jug of campaign likker along. To kill a flock of birds with one rock, he explained to the coroner. They had been sampling the likker along the way.

Jess Warner looked them over and said curtly, "You know a damn sight better than to bring a jug to a roundup, Sheriff. You git the cook drunk and you'll go hungry fer supper. Pass that jug around and you'll have a dozen fights on your hands. Oklahoma Kane has every man in the outfit fightin' mad, and that election jug is all that it'll take to turn this outfit into a general massacre. Let's git down to business. Count off the men you and the coroner needs for a jury and we'll ride out to where Fox is a-layin' in the mud."

Jess Warner beckoned the sheriff and coroner aside when they had examined the dead body. "If I was you fellers, I'd instruct the coroner's jury to call it suicide." Jess told them how the waspish roundup cook had solved the mystery of Fox's death.

"That's a hell of a verdict, Jess," said the sheriff.

"I won't argue that." Jess's blue eyes cut a look at the men who stood there in the gumbo mud, their hats dripping and their yellow slickers glistening in the rain. "But it might save one hell of a slaughter

amongst these cowhands just the same."

The coroner saw the wisdom in old Jess Warner's suggestion, and the six Double Circle cowhands on the coroner's jury were in agreement.

"We didn't find a law badge on the de-mised carcass," said the coroner. "Looks like he swallowed it. Fox killed hisself. The verdict is suicide." He sprayed the mud with tobacco juice. "Plant him here, boys, and mark the grave."

He climbed into his top buggy and the sheriff climbed in alongside, and they drove back to camp in the rain.

It was getting dark by the time they reached camp. Greasy Dan had rinsed out his vinegar jug. He slipped around to the rear end of the top buggy while the coroner and sheriff were busy unhooking the team and pulling off the harness, and using a funnel, he half filled the vinegar bottle from the sheriff's jug, and vanished in the darkness.

The suicide verdict was treated as some tippy, gruesome joke to begin with. But nobody laughed. Until the campaign jug went around. Then the tension commenced to slack off. Everyone was gathered in the candle-lit bed tent when Greasy Dan poked his rain-soaked head and shoulders through the tent flap.

"I ain't the man to speak harmful of the dead." His eyes were bloodshot and his tongue thick. "But no man likes a man who wears a law badge pinned to his undershirt. Fact is, you all hated Fox's guts when he was alive, and there's no percentage in fightin' over him after he's dead." Greasy Dan pulled off his soaked floursack apron and threw it into Oklahoma Kane's face. "Git yourself another cook, you red-muzzled coyote!"

Greasy Dan's head and shoulders disappeared. Kane wiped the muddy water from his stubble of red whiskers. Somebody laughed and grins broke out on other grim faces, and there was almost a hysterical fervor to it when the men joined in the hoorawing and joshing. The air had cleared. Men who had not spoken for days grinned at each other. It looked like the drunken roundup cook had saved them all from some impending disaster.

The Double Circle outfit went back to fighting mosquitoes.

Greasy Dan as a rule, if he so much as

smelled a cork, would head for town, but the rain and the gumbo mud held him back. He was now barricaded in the mess tent and had set the dishpan piled up with dirty tinware outside to let the rain wash the dishes. He had taken one front lid off the stove and shoved green sagebrush into the firebox. The tent was filled with the pungent yellow smoke. He had cut the copper-riveted bed straps and put the Windy Kid to bed in Fox's bed and was feeding him hot toddies. The Windy Kid's face was flushed and he was all but passed out from the strong toddies the cook had poured into him, and the smudge smoke brought tears to his eyes.

"A man's home," Greasy Dan kept bellying through the smoky lantern light, "is his castle. Let any son come in and I'll slice his danged head off and hand it to him. Especially Oklahoma Kane!"

The smoke was so thick and Greasy Dan's eyes so bleared that when Jess Warner showed up, the drunken cook mistook him for Kane and ran him out. He would have followed Jess but he tripped and went sprawling. He struck his head against the stove and hollered that Oklahoma Kane had shot him. He got to his feet and staggered outside, brandishing the heavy meat cleaver.

He collided heavily with Dingo Yates. Dingo dodged the heavy blade and tripped the cook up and dragged him back into the mess tent.

"So it's you, Dingo Yates, you snake in the grass!" Greasy Dan's loud bellow cut into the night and into the bed tent where men had stopped talking to listen. "You'd kill the man who tried to cover your murder tracks. That's all the thanks I kin expect from a stir-locoed convict! I seen that law badge of Fox's when it fell outa your pocket and you picked it up. Wake up, kid. You're Dingo's side-pardner. Wake up, so you kin watch him murder another man!"

Greasy Dan had grabbed up a long-bladed butcher knife. He was staggering drunk, and blood oozed from a long cut on his temple where his head had hit the sharp corner of the stove. He had a wild look in his eyes and he was howling like a banshee, the knife blade glittering in the lantern light.

Jess Warner came into the mess tent,

walking slow. He shoved Dingo aside and came toward the drunk roundup cook.

"Simmer down, Dan," the old cowman drawled quietly. "I won't let nobody kill you. Put down that knife and if you got a drink left, I could use it. Old man Jess is kinda tuckered out. I was hopin' you saved me a dram."

"Hell, yes. If I was dyin' I'd give you the last drink I had, Jess." Tears welled to the cook's eyes and the butcher knife slid from his hand and fell across his rolled bed.

Jess Warner took the uncorked jug and shook it. It was empty. Greasy Dan melted in the throes of a crying jag. He was still sobbing when Jess unrolled his bed and put him, fully clothed, beneath the tarp and piled soogans and blankets. His sobs soon blended into snores.

Grizzled Jess poured coffee into a battered tin cup and looked at Dingo Yates through the smudge-smoked lantern light. Greasy Dan's wild outburst had been whiskey talk, but it had been loud enough for every man in camp, including the sheriff and the coroner, to hear. Worse still, they had been in the bed tent and had not seen the ludicrous aspect of what had gone on in the mess tent. What they had heard had an underlaying foundation. It sounded bad for Dingo Yates.

Dingo's opaque black eyes glittered in the smoky light. His rain-wet face looked wooden. He had no intention of answering the question in the squinted eyes of Jess Warner.

The Windy Kid was out like a light.

Jess said quietly, "No tellin' what them fellers in the bed tent might take a notion to do. I'd hightail it, Dingo."

Dingo Yates took the nickel law badge from his pocket and tossed it on the rawhide-covered mess table. "The kid found it in the pocket of the slicker he loaned you last night. He give it to me. Greasy Dan saw me pick it up when it dropped out of my pocket." Dingo pulled his hat down and grinned flatly. "I'll be somewhere around, Jess." He backed out of the mess tent.

CHAPTER

3

The Windy Kid Talks

Jess Warner told the sheriff that he would be wise to stick to the suicide ver-

dict that the coroner's jury had rendered in the first place. Just because the cook got drunk and reversed his own decision, he said, was no sign the coroner should follow suit. Greasy Dan would sober up by morning and deny everything he had said.

"Dingo Yates and the Windy Kid and me wasn't the only men out on third guard when Fox was shot in the back." Jess stood in the doorway of the bed tent, warming the palms of his hands around a big tin cup of steaming black coffee. "I sent back word with the men coming off second guard to wake up Oklahoma Kane and tell him to send out every man in camp." His squinted eyes peered through the smoke in the bed tent and found the two cowhands who had been on second guard. "I taken it fer granted you boys done what I told you."

"Kane's bed was empty," one of them said. "His horse was gone. Dingo and the Windy Kid were out on guard and I had seen Fox ridin' out to the herd just as we came in. Knowin' how fussy Kane is about wantin' to be the whole cheese, I hesitated about callin' all hands. But when I found he was gone, I woke every man in camp. Me'n my guard partner were the only men left in camp besides the cook and the horse wrangler. They was all out there when the herd stampeded."

Jess Warner's quiet drawl filled the bed tent. "If you wasn't out there, Kane, where the hell was you?"

Oklahoma Kane's teeth bared in a red-whiskered grin. The glitter of his green eyes showed through the smoke from the sagebrush smudge they had lit in the stove.

"I was helpin' the nighthawk hold his remuda together." Kane lit the cigarette he had been rolling and said to nobody in particular, "Old Jess would shore like to blame me for that killin', on account I got his ramrod job."

"You couldn't have been on horse guard," Jess said. "When I found Fox in the mud, you was the first man to show up after I fired off my gun fer a signal."

Kane grinned. "I only heard five shots fer a signal. That gun of yours holds six ca'tridges, old timer. Explain that."

"I've always made a practice of leavin' an empty chamber under the gun hammer. These single-action Colt guns will go off

when there's a loaded cartridge under the firin' pin, if the gun is dropped. It pays to be cautious thataway." Jess Warner handed his gun, butt first, to the sheriff. "Take a look at 'er."

The sheriff was commencing to feel uncomfortable. His jug was empty and the liquor was dying out inside him. Right now he would trade his badge for a pint.

"Keep your damn gun, Jess. Fox shot hisself in the back and that's the size of it." He chewed on one of his five-cent cigars, and cursed Greasy Dan for a damned whiskey thief.

Jess Warner finished his coffee and walked through the black rain to the mess tent. The Windy Kid had thrown off the tarp and blankets. His flushed face looked like he was running a fever. Sweat glistened on his skin and his straw colored hair was dank. He rolled his eyes and groaned like he was delirious.

Jess Warner gave him a worried look. "Keep them covers on, son. You don't want to come down with pneumonia. Looks like you got chills and fever." He bent down to pull up the covers and got a whiff of the Kid's whiskey breath.

"I'm dyin', Jess," groaned the Windy Kid. His face was ghastly white. "I ain't cut out for a drinkin' man, Jess."

Jess Warner opened Fox's warsack that the Windy Kid had been using for a pillow. He quickly pocketed the vest-pocket tally book he found inside a clean sock. He tied the warsack and shoved it back under the Windy Kid's head, and told him to go back to sleep.

"I'm scared to go to sleep, Jess. Don't leave me alone. I don't want to be murdered."

"Don't git the heebie-jeebies on me, son. It's bad enough when Greasy Dan wakes up with snakes in his boots. Don't go loco on me. Nobody wants to kill you."

"The hell they don't!" The Windy Kid threw off the tarp. Fear showed in his eyes. "You don't know. I gotta git away from here. Where's Dingo?"

"Dingo pulled out," answered Jess.

The Windy Kid was sitting up now. He found his hat and pulled it on and pawed under the bed until he found his six-shooter and his wet muddy boots with the spurs still on. Jess Warner handed him a dry shirt and a pair of Levi overalls.

"Who would want to kill you, son?" Jess filled a cup of coffee and handed it to the Windy Kid, who was shivering in his underwear. He swallowed it down in big gulps.

"The man that shot Fox in the back," the Windy Kid said. "I saw him. He took two shots at me, just as all hell tore loose and I had to ride hard to git outa the way of the stampede. He's waitin' right now fer the chance to kill me." He was struggling with a wet boot.

"Who was it, son?" Jess asked quietly.

"I don't know," said the Windy Kid.

"Was it Dingo Yates?"

THE Windy Kid opened his mouth to say something and it stayed open, slack jawed. His eyes looked past the old cowhand, and Jess turned his head and saw Oklahoma Kane standing in the doorway. A twisted grin was on Kane's face and his green eyes were looking at the Windy Kid. He stepped into the tent.

"You're on horse guard, Kid. Where's that guard pardner of yours?"

"Dingo's done gone," answered Jess Warner.

"I figgered he'd coyote." Kane's short laugh rattled harshly. "For a man that travels on his tough shape, he spooks easy. Rattle yore hocks, Kid. Looks like I got to stand Dingo's guard fer him." Kane was buttoning his long black saddle slicker. "Let's go, Kid."

Jess Warner had seen the scared look in the Windy Kid's eyes and saw his skin whiten. His teeth were gritting in a frantic effort to keep them from chattering.

"The boy's sick, Kane. He's comin' down with chills and fever." Jesse's eyes were squinted to ice blue slivers. "Crawl back in that bed, son," he said without taking his eyes away from the big red-whiskered wagon boss. "If you're in shape to take Dan's place come daybreak, you kin cook breakfast."

Kane was breathing hard through flared nostrils. "A man would think you was still ramroddin' the Double Circle outfit, Warner."

"Yeah." Jess grinned faintly. "A man would think so."

The eyes of the two men locked and held. The wagon boss gave the Windy Kid a hard look and then stalked out.

The Windy Kid looked sick and scared. There was nothing left of his would-be tough swagger. Something had taken it out of him.

Jess Warner scowled at him. "Mebbyso you still want to be tough, like Dingo Yates?"

Jess saw the young cowpuncher shudder as his scared eyes flickered. "No. I g't drug outa me last night." His eyes looked at the older man now without flinching. "I reckon when it come to a real showdown, I'm yellow bellied."

"Mebbyso if you'd throw away that gun, you'd make a fair to middlin' cowhand. But right now, you're shore underfoot. That's why I'm goin' to turn you over to the sheriff."

"I didn't do nothin', Jess! Honest to God, I didn't!"

"But you saw the killin'." Jess Warner turned. "You crawl into bed. The sheriff's over in the bed tent. I'll fetch him over here so's he kin ride close herd on you."

Jess Warner had managed for a slicker, but the cold wet of the night bit through and he felt his age as he headed for the bed tent. He could make out the lighted room through the black rain and that was all. The darkness closed in on him and he sloshed his way through the mud puddles.

The cowpunchers had dug a ditch all around both tents to carry the water off. Bedrolls were spread out inside, and most of the hands had pulled off their boots and gone to bed. The paunchy sheriff stood with his back to the stove, his face mottled with purplish blotches. He looked at Jess with bloodshot eyes.

"Pull on your slicker, Sheriff," Jess told him.

"If you think you're goin' to drag me out in that storm, you got another think coming. I held kangaroo court on a snake that shoulda bin born dead. If Dingo Yates was to walk in here, I'd buy him a drink—if that drunk cook hadn't stole my likker." The sheriff had almost run out of whiskey, and consequently he was in a very bad humor.

Jess Warner held Fox's nickel shield in his hand for the sheriff to see. "I'm takin' you nowhere but about fifty feet to the mess tent. There's a big pot of coffee on the stove and that's the best I have to offer.

The Windy Kid is over there, and I want you to stand guard on him. He watched Fox git killed, and the man that done the killin' is goin' to try to murder the boy. Now crawl into that slicker. As long as you got that tin star tacked onto your paunch, you'll work at the job."

When they got back to the mess tent, the Windy Kid was gone. His yellow slicker lay across Fox's tarp-covered bed.

"What kind of a skin-game are you tryin' to pull on me now?" growled the sheriff.

When he turned around Jess Warner was not there. He was sloshing through the mud, headed for his saddled horse tied to the rear wheel of the bed wagon. He jerked the wet hackamore rope free and was tightening his saddle cinch when somebody jumped him from behind. A gun barrel clubbed down on his head and his knees buckled, and he went down and lay motionless in the mud.

CHAPTER

4

Exploding Guns

The first dim light of dawn filtered through the leaden sky. It was still raining. Singly or in pairs, the men who had been on horse guard rode in to camp on weary horses. The nighthawk showed up. He left his horse ground-tied and came into the mess tent.

Greasy Dan, a dirty floursack apron tied on, fumbled around banking skillet and pots, throwing some kind of a breakfast together. He was too sick to cuss anybody out for tracking mud into his tent.

The sheriff had found a bottle in Fox's warsack and he was sitting on the dead man's rolled up bed, holding the bottle in both hands and taking a nip at it, viewing the roundup cook with a jaundiced eye and refusing him the drink he needed and begged for with bloodshot eyes.

Oklahoma Kane had rolled up the cook's bed. He sat straddle of it, a cup of coffee in his hand. His gun lay in front of him on the bed. He had unbuttoned his black slicker and it hung down on either side of him. His sodden hat was pulled down at a fighting angle across his hard green eyes that watched the door of the tent.

The nighthawk looked at Kane with bloodshot eyes. "The whole damned re-

muda slipped away. I tried to keep the bell horses bunched, but they melted away one by one. You couldn't see your hand in front of your eyes. Don't bother to fire me. I quit."

"You done cryin'?" Kane's voice sounded ugly. "Then go get lost again."

Every man in the outfit was sullen eyed, grim lipped, as they filed into the mess tent and filled tin cups with strong black coffee and stood sipping the hot liquid. Nobody sat down. When a man came in he had to shoulder his way through other slicker-clad cowhands.

The only man in camp who was contented with his lot was the coroner. He had crawled into some cowhand's bed in the bed tent and pulled the tarp up over his head and was sleeping.

Oklahoma Kane kept tally of his men as they drifted in. He had shaken the cook awake and cuffed him around until he tied on his apron and got breakfast started. The biscuits were burned on the outside and raw dough in the middle. The fried spuds were soaked in rancid lard. The meat was charred but raw inside and cold. Even the coffee tasted bitter. And to make it worse the tobacco was too damp to burn. The Double Circle outfit was bogged down and afoot. Every man was on the prod, surly, tight lipped, empty bellied.

There were three men missing. Old Jess Warner, the Windy Kid, and Dingo Yates.

Kane put his cup of coffee on the ground. He reached out a long arm and yanked the bottle out of the sheriff's hand. "Open your mouth, you sorry varmint, and I'll bust this bottle acrost your thick skull."

Kane poured the coffee out of his cup and filled it to the brim with whiskey, then handed the almost empty bottle back to the sheriff. Every man was eyeing the big, red-whiskered wagon boss as he gulped down the raw whiskey and threw away his tin cup. A little color came into his face as the whiskey took hold. His eyes narrowed to glass slivers as he watched the front end of the tent where the canvas fly joined it to the mess box at the end of the wagon.

Oklahoma Kane was waiting for Dingo Yates to show up, and they all knew it. They backed away out of line of fire. They knew the big ramrod was edgy, his nerves scraped raw. He kept his right hand near his gun.

The rain made an almost hushed sound as it came down on the tent, and there was a constant drip, drip as it came down the slanted sides of the tent and trickled into the filled trench around the outside.

Greasy Dan quit slamming his skillet and pots and stood there, eyeing the bottle in the sheriff's pudgy hands.

Then they all heard the Windy Kid's voice outside the mess tent. "... I'm tellin' it, just like I seen it happen."

Oklahoma Kane stiffened, his hand closing on his gun.

The Windy Kid kept talking. "The lightning made everything lighter than day. I seen Fox ridin' toward me, humped over and so close I saw his face plain. A man in a black slicker was behind him about twenty feet. I saw the gun in his hand and then it went off and I seen the flame. The bullet hit Fox, kinda jerking him in his saddle. His horse spooked and he went over backwards. Then the cattle stampeded and I had to git away fast. The feller in the black slicker hollered somethin' and shot twice at me and I could hear the sound of the bullets. I looked back and saw Fox's horse runnin', and the man in the black slicker had to ride like hell to keep from gettin' ketched in the stampede. I caught sight of Fox lyin' in the mud and then it seemed like the whole herd was trompin' him.

"When I met you and told you, you said the only man in the outfit who wore a

black slicker was Oklahoma Kane—but to keep my mouth shut or I'd be the next murder victim. That's why I run off in the night. I seen Kane come in the tent and I ducked under and out. I knew I had to hide, so I crawled into the bed wagon where it was dry under the canvas top.

"I heard Jess Warner come for his saddled horse that was tied to the bed wagon. Then there was a ruckus and I heard the horse snort and then somebody said, 'I got that old varmint.' It taken me a long time to git up the nerve to crawl outa the wagon, but I did and I h'isted Jess into the bed wagon.

"I reckon I'm yellow bellied because I'm scared to go into the mess tent where Kane is," the Windy Kid finished.

There was no mistaking Dingo Yates' flat-toned voice. "You done all right, Kid. You spoke your speech like a man, loud enough, I reckon, for every man in the mess tent to hear. You crawl back in the bed wagon with Jess and stay there till it's over." There was a short silence; then Dingo Yates bawled, "Send that big red-muzzled killer out here where I'm waitin', boys!"

INSIDE the lantern-lit mess tent, Oklahoma Kane sat tensed. The hide above the red stubble of beard showed gray, and the green eyes were slitted. The gun in his hand seemed to cover every man there, and



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SPORTS 25c
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they stayed frozen in their boot tracks. He moved cautiously now, until he was crouched behind the cook's bedroll. His left hand eased up the wet canvas wall, and the two iron pegs holding it down slid easily up in the wet ground. Kane was down on one knee now. He lifted the side wall quickly and when it dropped Kane was on the outside. The men inside were freed from the menace of his gun.

"Watch out, Dingo! He went out!" someone shouted.

The two guns seemed to explode at the same time. The Windy Kid was the only eye witness to that gun duel. He watched it from the high box of the bed wagon and saw it all in the gray rain.

Dingo Yates stood there, tall, lean, in his yellow slicker, the rain dripping from his hat brim. His lips were pulled back to show his teeth in a wolfish grin. He had been watching the grotesque shadow Kane made on the lighted wall of the wet tent, and was ready and waiting for him when the big ramrod slid out from under.

Oklahoma Kane lay in the water-filled trench, hat pulled down, slitted eyes cutting quick glances until they found Dingo Yates. Then he squeezed the trigger of his gun.

Dingo Yates shot to kill. The .45 slug from his gun tore into the middle of Kane's forehead, dead center between the eyes. Oklahoma Kane was dead when his trigger finger jerked. His bullet tore splinters in the high box of the bed wagon so close to the Windy Kid that he let out a yelp.

Dingo Yates stood there, a thin wisp of smoke drifting from the muzzle of his six-shooter. "There's Fox's killer, Sheriff," his voice sounded through the gun echoes. "I'm done with him." He shoved his gun out of sight.

The Windy Kid had a branding iron gripped in both hands. Dingo nodded and the Windy Kid put it down. "Let's have a look at Jess," Dingo said.

The Windy Kid had put Jess to bed in his own bed roll that was still in the bed wagon. There was a big lump on Jess' head and the gray hair was matted with blood.

"You better lay still, Jess," Dingo told him. "Somebody knocked you in the head. You might have a cracked skull."

"Cracked hell, she's split wide open. I mighta knowed that red-muzzled scoundrel

was layin' fer me. Before we go further up the crick, Dingo, it isn't you Fox was after. It's Oklahoma Kane. He's wanted by the Wyoming law for pulling off a big cattle steal. His real name ain't Oklahoma Kane. The Cattlemen's Association were notified by the owners of the Double Circle outfit that they thought they had spotted the wanted man, who had tackled them for a job. They had given him the job of ramrodding the Double Circle wagon on the roundup, and asked the Association to send someone out after him. The Association sent their man Fox to the roundup as a 7 Dash rep. Evidently Kane knew who Fox was, and when he saw his chance to kill him so that it would look like an accident, he shot him. Fox had the whole story written in the tally book I found in his warsack, and he give me authority to play his hand out."

"I just killed Oklahoma Kane," Dingo told Jess.

Jess Warner sat up. Then he lay down again. A slow grin spread across his leathery face. "The Double Circle talked the 7 Dash into getting you out on parole. They figured you were too good a cowman to be left to rot in the pen, Dingo. I'll see that you git the job runnin' the Double Circle wagon. I'm getting too old to be anything but a pensioned-off gentle Annie beef boss."

Jess Warner pulled the bed tarp up over his head. "Now let me ketch up with the sleep I bin losin'. There ain't nothin' wrong with my head a little sleep won't cure." It was not long until Jess was snoring.

Dingo and the Windy Kid backed out of the bed wagon and stepped to the ground.

Dingo gripped the Windy Kid's shoulder and grinned at him. "I'll tell you somethin' if you won't let it go further, pardner. I'd hate to be laughed outa camp for a man afraid of his ponies. But if you kin manage it without 'em ketchin' on, I'd like to have you top off a couple of ornery bronses I got in my string."

"Shore thing, Dingo." The Windy Kid dropped his voice to a whisper. He was swelling up, fit to burst with pride. "They'll never ketch on." The word *pardner* sang in the Windy Kid's young heart.

Jess Warner could have told the Windy Kid, but he never did, that Dingo Yates had never known the meaning of fear.

THE BAKE OVEN RUCKUS



"You're the one who needs killing!" the kid said.

By **THOMAS THOMPSON**

Strong as the bond between them was the bitterness that took its place—when range war made each Holliver boy his twin's deadliest enemy.

IT HAPPENED in Mike Dewy's saloon, as most things did in the Bake Oven country. Young Pete Benton, with a grin that didn't mean anything on his lips and too much to drink under his belt, leaned back against the bar and repeated his accusation. "I said the Twin Hearts are bunch of damn rustlers." He moved away from the bar and his right hand was close to the gun on his hip. "Is

that loud enough now, Bobby Swinton?"

Bobby Swinton, a Twin Heart puncher no older than Pete, dropped his shot glass to the floor. At the end of the room Phin Clayton, a sparse, hatchet-faced man, made no attempt to interfere, though he was the one man who could have. He stood there, breathing deeply, his nostrils flared, his eyes bright. He was the richest man in the country and he didn't have to wear fancy clothes to show it. "You're a damn liar, Pete Benton," Bobby Swinton said.

There was no stopping it now. It had gone too far. They were kids, their blood hot from the year-old trouble, both pig-headedly loyal, both wanting to do something for their brand. Bobby had a pint bottle shoved in his front pocket. It could have been a gun. Bobby's hand dropped and Pete drew. The draw was slow, as such things go, but the gun was cocked when it came out of the holster and Pete's finger was nervous. The gun crashed and a woman screamed and Bobby Swinton stood there, his grin fading from his face, and then he was sliding down, almost slowly, it seemed. The doc said later he was dead when he hit the floor.

A horrible panic hit Pete Benton deep in the stomach. He had known Bobby all his life. They had been kids together. He turned around and saw Buck and Ted Holliver coming through the door of the saloon and he started to run. The gun was still in his hand and when Ted Holliver tried to stop him he saw Buck slap Ted's arm aside. The brothers stood there a second, straining against each other, and Pete Benton was through the door.

He still had that gun and men scattered and the sickening excitement of a killing built its bedlam. Six men ran from the harness shop; a woman dashed out into the middle of the street and caught her two kids by the arm. Wilbur, the constable, came puffing and blowing, pounding along on his stubby legs. He found the Holliver brothers standing there staring at each other, a look of growing realization of full disaster on their identical faces.

The Hollivers were twins, and folks said if one caught a cold the other caught a cold. It had always been that way. They had been born and raised in the Bake Oven country and had never found any reason to leave. When Buck got his first

riding job on C Bar, Ted got his first riding job on Twin Heart. They became foremen of their respective spreads on the same day and then got good and drunk to celebrate.

And then things changed, some way, and Buck made a couple of good deals on the side and now, for a year, he had been sole owner of C Bar. Ted never went any higher than foreman. They joked about it, but folks thought it might be strained joking. They even fought about the relative merits of the two spreads and nearly came to blows over it, but it was all in fun, folks guessed. You couldn't separate the Holliver twins.

But now there was a dead man there on the floor—a Twin Heart man—or more nearly, a boy, and the thing that had been growing steadily ever since a passing dispute over range rights was out in the open and could no longer be ignored.

Ted Holliver didn't recognize his own voice. "Get Pete Benton back here, Buck," he said quietly. "See that he stands trial."

Buck Holliver looked at his brother, and it was like looking into a mirror. He felt his own growing anger, the tearing feeling of knowing he had taken all he could take, and he saw that feeling reflected in his twin's eyes. "Trial for what, Ted?" he said softly. "For killing a horse thief?"

The constable said, "Damn it to hell." The constable was a druggist. He was a good notary public but he had never been called on to exercise the law-enforcement part of his office.

It was Buck who pushed the constable aside. No one paid any attention to Phin Clayton standing there at the back of the saloon, his thin hands twisting together, his eyes bright, his forehead suddenly moist. Phin Clayton, the sheep man, the man who owned half of Bake Oven. They didn't see him move over to the bar but they heard him when he spoke.

He had a sawed-off shotgun in his hand and it was resting on the bar top, pointed at the Holliver brothers. "Take it outside," Phin Clayton said. His voice was as oily as his skin, a slippery voice with a hint of arrogance tempered with a servile whine in it. "I don't know which one of you Hollivers is stealing from the other and I don't care."

Somebody handed Wilbur a gun and the constable took it. He seemed reluctant about

it, but he didn't want these two to get out-side together. Maybe he could handle them if they stayed in here.

"You cool down, you two," Wilbur said, and his thumb hooked back the hammer. "Damn it to hell, boys, you two are brothers."

"You started this, Buck," Ted Holliver said.

"Did I?" Buck said. "I lost two more cows yesterday. I wasn't going to say anything about it. I figgered if that was the only way you could get a herd started, I'd let it go at that and call it cheap."

"Take that back, Buck."

Buck Holliver shook his head. "It had to come out in the open, Ted. I'm glad my boy had guts enough to speak his piece, even if I didn't. If Pete Benton comes to me, I'll take him in. If you think you can take him, come and get him."

IT WAS then that Buck Holliver turned around and walked out of Mike Dewy's saloon. He hadn't gone a block down the street before the eight C Bar men had fallen in behind him. They were good men, all young, all men with temper and they wore guns. The town saw them pick up their horses and ride south toward C Bar, and the town had a dead kid on its hands.

But it wasn't death and trouble alone that the town felt. It had seen an old thing die, and though most of the men didn't know for sure why, they knew they hurt like sin inside with a nasty, tearing feeling that wouldn't go away. The Holliver twins had been raised here—the first twins to be born in Bake Oven. They were still here, as much alike as ever with their slow grins and their dry wit and their latent hell-raising that they kept in check. Buck was the more aggressive; Ted was the dreamer. But they were one and the same, the Holliver twins. Somehow it wasn't only Bobby Swinton lying in there dead. It was something a lot bigger than that.

Ted Holliver felt it too, but he could name it. A world and a way of life had gone to hell. He had lost a brother—a brother who had been closer to him than his own skin. It was crazy how things kept flashing across his mind as he walked down the street, things he didn't want to remember, but they were all there, as plain as the day they happened; and things that had

been funny for twenty years weren't funny any more, and he wondered how it was that the funny memories hurt worse than the few sad memories.

The Twin Heart crew was down at the corral. He had known they would be. They stood there, eight of them, waiting for Ted, and he saw their faces, all strangely alike, and it was hard to make names fit the faces. Lefty and Dog Hole and Benny the Boom and Cactus and Pinto and Heel Fly Harry and Sad Sam Simpson and Pretty Boy. Crazy names, each one meaning something and each one bringing back another memory.

Pretty Boy said, "If folks had just stayed out of it, Bobby and Pete could a worked it out between them. Everybody kept pickin' at the sore. That damn Phin Clayton kept takin' Pete's side against Bobby."

"Shut up," Ted Holliver said.

"Bobby never stole a horse in his life."

"I said shut up!"

They saddled up in silence. When the horses were ready, Lefty scratched his shoulder and said, "You want I should take care of things, Ted?" Lefty was the oldest man in the crew. He had one arm missing, the empty sleeve rolled close to his shoulder. Sometimes, when he was nervous or mad, he scratched his shoulder.

Ted reached into his pocket and took out a ten-dollar bill. "Get ahold of Packard down at the furniture store. Packard will know how to fix things." Packard was the undertaker.

Benny the Boom kept looking off down the street as if he were expecting something to happen. Benny was young. He wasn't much older than Bobby. The pair of them had made a fine roping team. "He had some folks up to Dufur," Benny said.

"I was going up that way," Ted said. "I'll tell 'em." It was a forty-mile trip. He spoke of it as if it were across the street.

Lefty mounted with the others but when they passed the Packard furniture store and undertaking parlor Lefty reined in and dismounted. The others rode straight down the street. They didn't look back. Under his breath Benny the Boom said, "Damn it to hell!"

The brassy sky was dull with the smoke from the mile-long fire where Phin Clayton's sheep herders were burning off the

sage. It made the afternoon seem hotter than it was, and sometimes little white spirals of ash fell and settled on the sweaty hides of the horses. In the spring the fresh grass would sprout from the ashes and the rolling hills would be green with it one day, muddy white with sheep the next. In time the hills would be brown and bare. The Twin Heart crew took the trail that lifted up from the canyon and they passed one of Clayton's sheep camps.

There were four men at the sheep camp and they looked up from a greasy deck of cards as the riders came into view. One was bearded and dirty and he wore a gun; the others were typical sheep herders, men with battered felt hats and broken shoes, men thin lipped from years of silent loneliness. The man with the gun played a card carefully against the outspread blanket and stared at the deck. Ted Holliver glanced at the herders as he rode by but he didn't speak. Ted neither liked sheep nor disliked them. He ignored them, as did most cowmen.

It wouldn't be easy telling Bobby Swinton's folks up in Dufur what had happened. It wouldn't be easy telling Walt Grange and his wife, either. Walt Grange was the owner of Twin Hearts, Ted Holliver's boss. He was an old man and his wife was old, but they both had young eyes and their smiles always stayed around after they had left a room.

That Twin Heart brand, two hearts entwined, hadn't happened by accident. Walt Grange and his wife Maybelle belonged together. It had welded them together, building up Twin Heart, but it had taken a lot out of them, too. They wouldn't stay and face trouble, Walt and Maybelle wouldn't. They were old and you couldn't blame people their age for wanting peace and quiet. They wanted each other and silent memories and a touch of a hand in the dark. They didn't want trouble, Ted figured. He had decided that a long time ago, and he had stayed with them even when he might have done better on his own, trying to run Twin Heart the way he knew they wanted it, because he knew that Twin Heart was their biggest memory. Phin Clayton had made a couple of good offers for Twin Heart, but as long as things were going along all right Walt and Maybelle couldn't see any reason for selling a dream.

THE way Walt and Maybelle took the news didn't help any. They were sitting on the porch in the shade of early evening, two people who looked alike because they thought alike, Maybelle in her Lincoln rocker, Walt leaning where he could scratch his back against a porch post if his back got to itching. Ted dismounted in front of them and dropped his reins and then he told them.

He saw the color go out of Maybelle's faded lips and she closed her eyes and just sat still for a second and then she started to rock. Walt stood up and he kept opening and closing his right hand and he rubbed his hand up and down on his hip, like a man might rub a holster. And then Walt realized he was an old man and he sat down and started rubbing his hands together and he kept looking at them. "I got to ride up to Dufur," Ted said. "Bobby had kin up there."

Maybelle kept looking at Ted, trying to tell him something with her eyes, something that needed saying but something she couldn't say. Finally she said, "Does Buck know about this, Ted?"

"He was there," Ted said.

Maybelle laid her hands in her lap and didn't rock any more, and Walt looked out across the hills and canyons of Twin Heart, remembering things, and his lips moved slightly. It was hard to tell if he was cussing or praying. He looked at Maybelle and he was tired and all he wanted was a few more quiet years where the two of them could sit and remember. . . .

The sun went down and the darkness gathered fast and there was a long, thin rim of red fire where Phin Clayton was burning sage. Ted changed horses before starting for Dufur. He wasn't hungry so he didn't eat anything.

It was full dark when he crossed the Deschutes at Sherars bridge and the hollow sound of hoofbeats lifted above the surge of the water. The man on the bridge held a lantern up, and when he saw it was Ted he lowered the lantern quickly. News got around fast. Ted took the stage road. After he was up out of the canyon, he put the bay into a mile-eating running walk. At that it was past midnight when he came to the tumbled-down hen-yard outfit at the far end of Tygh Valley. A hound started baying and a couple of curs took up the

clamor. Funny, he thought, but folks with barely enough to eat always had enough for a half dozen dogs.

A lamp flickered dimly and flared up and a man in a nightgown came to the door. His voice was thin and high and sleepy. "Damn you, dogs. Hesh up that racket, you hear now?"

"Mr. Swinton?"

"What's that?" Swinton coughed harshly and cleared his throat. "That you, Mr. Holliver? By grannies, it is. Maw, Mr. Holliver's here. Betty Sue, you get up and go on in the back room so as Mr. Holliver can come in. Jay Dee! Damn you, son, you rustle out here and take Mr. Holliver's horse!" Swinton went in and got the lamp and came outside, his bare toes curling away from the rough dirt of the yard. "Sure glad to see you, Mr. Holliver. How's that young pup Bobby makin' out? He ain't givin' you no trouble, is he, Mr. Holliver? Maw, you fixin' to get up?"

"Gracious sakes alive," Maw Swinton called. "I wasn't plannin' on no company. Not that I ain't glad to have you, Mr. Holliver. Betty Sue, you get dressed and get

on out there and fix some coffee for Mr. Holliver."

"Don't go to no trouble, Mr. Swinton," Ted said. "Fact is, I just want to talk to you alone for a minute." The words felt bulky and rough.

"Why, sure. Sure, Mr. Holliver."

Maw Swinton's voice was unsteady. She was shaking her daughter awake. "Betty Sue, it's that nice Mr. Holliver. No no, not that one. Bobby's boss." Ted could hear Betty Sue's giggle. Swinton closed the door and came on over closer to Ted's horse.

"It's bad news, Mr. Swinton."

They came into the house later, Ted with his hat in his hand, Mr. Swinton walking tiredly, his eyes on the floor. Betty Sue giggled. "Paw, if you don't look outlandish in that nightgown."

She was a full-bosomed girl of seventeen, her hair sunburned, her face puffed with sleep. A wrinkled pillow had made a network of red on her right cheek. She had pulled a calico dress hurriedly over her head and her calves were bare and brown. Her attitude was one of amused and tolerant apology for the house and her dad.



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Mrs. Swinton came out of the bedroom, brushing her hair with the back of her hand. She shoosed Betty Sue toward the kitchen.

"Sakes alive, Betty Sue, ain't you never seen a man before? Not many at that," she said aside to Ted. "Not that Betty ain't mighty popular. She's a sensible girl, that one. No foolishness. Jay Dee! Ain't you gonna say hello to Mr. Holliver?"

Jay Dee was wearing waist overalls and no shirt. He was fourteen, lean and stringy and sleepy, his eyes glazed, his yawn prodigious. "Hallo, Mr. Holliver."

"Maw." Mr. Swinton stood there, his eyes on the floor, the striped flannel nightgown hanging limply against his skinny shanks. "Maw." He looked up then, his faded eyes hurt and frightened and pleading, and his wife drew her breath in sharply.

Ted Holliver turned his hat in his hands. Jay Dee was half asleep again and Betty Sue was noisily busy in the kitchen. A thin wail lifted from the back bedroom. That was right, Ted remembered. Bobby had said he had a new brother.

"Sam!" Mrs. Swinton's voice was charged and wild. "What is it, Sam?"

"It'll take a minute to boil," Betty Sue called from the kitchen. "I got the fire goin'."

She stepped through the door and saw her mother and father and she saw Ted Holliver. Her eyes widened and she gripped her dress and pulled it closed at the throat. Ted Holliver went outside into the night and he wished he could just keep walking for a long, long ways. . . .

A FALSE dawn was on the rolling hills of Bake Oven when he recrossed Sherars bridge. He was dimly conscious of the smoke haze that had bundled itself into a ground-hugging cloud during the night. The smell of it was in the air, faint, covered by the river smell; and then as he rode up toward the top of the plateau it was strong and acrid, killing the morning cleanness with its pungency.

He skirted Bake Oven town, sleeping silently and mysteriously, and it was hard to realize that people lived in the dark houses with their gray windows. Someplace a dog was barking and a cow bell tinkled thinly. He saw Mike Dewy's saloon and

Packard's furniture store and he thought of Bobby Swinton.

South of the town, toward C Bar, Phin Clayton's three-story house in its grove of planted poplars was a dark mass against the thin light of morning. Ted took the trail that led upward to the Bake Oven plateau and now he tried to relax so that his thoughts would be orderly. He felt the soothing slap of the cantle as the horse climbed and then the steadier movement that told him he was on top. The shrill nicker of his horse jerked him out of his half sleep. He was near the sheep camp where the herders and the bearded man had played cards.

At first glance he thought the glow was from the burning sage on the rolling hills behind the sheep camp, but as he drew nearer, the light, alternately blotted by shadows, took shape and he realized men were moving around a campfire. It was early for the herders to be up unless there had been coyote trouble in the band. He was fully alert now and he saw the wagon tongues raised and propped to form a scaffold.

The trail passed close to the camp and because of the unusualness of the hour he called out to identify himself. There was an immediate cessation of movement and then a heavy voice, "Out early, ain't you, Holliver?"

"Never too early to find somebody up."

He wouldn't have let it go at that if it hadn't been for the obvious impatience in that voice. He reined in toward the camp, not sure of what he expected to find, and he saw two of the men spreading a tarp over one of the wagons. "You want something?" the same heavy voice asked.

"Cup of coffee, maybe," Ted said.

"Ain't made none yet."

Ted had ridden almost to the edge of the camp and now he saw the man who had been speaking, the heavy-set, bearded one. The man was standing between Ted and the wagon, and the herders had moved around and were standing with their backs to the wheels. There was a wash tub of animal entrails directly under the raised wagon tongues. "Doing some butchering?" Ted said.

"Yeah," the heavy man said. "A sheep."

There was a strained silence and Ted saw the bearded man's hand move closer to

his gun. "I never took much to sheep meat," Ted said. "I'd rather eat beef."

The bearded man's hand closed around the butt of his gun and one of the herders reached into the wagon bed and got a rifle. "Maybe that's because you're a cow man, Holliver," the big man said.

"Could be," Ted said. His left hand tightened against the reins, his right was free at his side. "Watch that burning when you get across the hill there. I got some barley just getting ripe."

"Sure," the big man said. "We'll watch it."

Ted reined his horse and rode on up the trail toward Twin Heart. He heard a faint mutter of voices behind him and then the sound of someone running. He dropped down into a draw and pulled up and in a little while he heard a horse heading toward town. A tight smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. *You didn't die for nothing, Bobby Swinton*, he thought to himself. *If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have found out until it was too late.*

He waited until the sound of hoofbeats had died out, and then he turned back, circling the camp. He'd have to pass through Bake Oven town and then he would head straight for C Bar. He wanted to see Buck. That hadn't been sheep entrails in that wash tub, and four o'clock in the morning was an odd time to be butchering a beef. He didn't need to see the hide or head to know the slaughtered beef had been wearing a C Bar brand and ear markings.

THE town was still asleep, but now the dawn was making up and the peaks of the Cascades were cold and blue above the black of the mountains. The pleasant chill that precedes a hot day lay quietly on the sleeping town. Ted took the trail that led by pastures where milk cows grazed on dewy grass, waiting for barefoot kids to take them in for morning milking. Somewhere an old man, impatient with wasting time on sleep, coughed fitfully, then started chopping the breakfast kindling.

Beyond the town, down in the draw, the black symmetrical cones of the Lombardy poplars were straight and still around Phin Clayton's house. The house was tall and white, and there was native grass, clipped close and watered green behind the picket

fence. There was a light somewhere deep inside the house. A rooster crowed and was answered by another from the other side of town. Ted's horse bowed its neck and looked toward the stable with its shingle roof and dove cote, and a man stepped from the shadows where he had been hiding.

"All right, Ted Holliver," the man said. "You found me, but you ain't taken me yet. Reach!" His voice was young and charged and hysterical. It was Pete Benton.

"Hello, Pete," Ted said softly. Ted's hand started toward his gun but now he relaxed and folded his hands on the saddle horn. "I wasn't looking for you."

"Get off that horse." Pete was trying to keep his voice down and he had to fight the pressure of the breath in his lungs. He moved and Ted saw the gun in his hand.

"Take it easy, Pete."

"You ain't gonna take me, hear? You damn cow stealin'—" His voice broke. "It's your fault Bobby's dead, you hear? I didn't want to kill Bobby. Honest to God I didn't want to kill Bobby!" The kid was half crazy with worry and fear and running. "You're the one who needs killing!"

Ted was dismounting slowly, his head turned toward Pete Benton. "Listen, Pete, I found out who's been stealing C Bar cows."

"So did I, damn you," Pete Benton said. "Don't try to soft talk me the way you did Bobby. Maybe Bobby didn't even know he was workin' for a damn rustler."

"Pete, you listen to me." Ted had both feet on the ground, his hands out away from his sides. He started walking forward slowly.

"Stay away from me!" He could see the dirt and grime on Pete's face, grime cut by tear tracks and smeared by a sleeve. "I ain't your brother. I can kill you without having it keep me awake nights!"

Ted's left hand was extended, palm down, and he approached the kid slowly, in much the manner he might have approached a mad dog. "Pete—"

"I warned you!" The gun in the kid's hand blasted but the light and his own excitement spoiled his aim. When he saw he had missed, he started slapping at the hammer with the heel of his left hand, trying to fan out the shots, accomplishing nothing. The barrel of the gun kept weaving and

jerked, the hammer never falling far enough to fire. Ted dove in toward the half-crazed kid and now he had his gun out, raising it to smash against Pete's arm. Pete's gun steadied and the hammer came to full cock.

"Pete! For heaven's sake!"

The whites of the kid's eyes were horribly visible. He was standing there, feet spread, that cocked gun in his hand. At that moment he was a killer. He cursed once and jerked the gun up and Ted Holliver fired. He saw Pete stagger back. He heard his body crash against the picket fence and then it was lying there, crumpled and still.

A window screeched and a dozen dogs started barking and a hen house came to life. Someplace close a baby cried. One after another windows flared into yellow life, immediately dulled by drawn shades. A man cursed violently and a woman kept screaming, "Oh, no. Oh, my God, no." Doors slammed and from Phin Clayton's house a voice kept yelling, "Who's there? Who's there, I say?"

A dozen people were around him now and their faces were blurred and Ted was sick. There were men with night shirts tucked hastily into pants tops, men with unlaced shoes, men with guns. "What happened?" "Pete Benton." "What happened?" "Pete Benton." He heard it over and over until it was swinging through his head, making him dizzy. . . .

And then out of the hushed confusion other snatches of conversation started drifting out like the little growing balls that roll toward a man in fever. "I heard six shots." "I only heard three."

"They say Buck Holliver and the C Bar crew are on their way to town."

"They'll shoot hell out of everything."

"I just heard one shot."

"Me too, just one."

"Hell, this poor kid never had a chance."

"Here's Mr. Clayton. Mr. Clayton, did you see what happened?"

Phin Clayton, fully dressed, was standing on his own side of the yard fence. The big, bearded man was with him. "I saw it all," Phin Clayton said. "Pete Benton was trying to get to my place. I guess Ted Holliver had been chasing him all night and run him in here."

The constable's trembling hand tightened

on Ted Holliver's arm. "I reckon you better come on over to the drug store, Ted. Hell, what must I do?"

THE sun came up and it was bloody red on the town of Bake Oven. Ted Holliver paced back and forth across the stuffy room at the back of Wilbur's drug store. It was only ten o'clock but the heat was already blistering. Dogs sought the shade of wagons; chickens walked with beaks agape and wings outspread. Six riders came down the street, their horses sweat-streaked and nervous. The men came into the drug store and one of them tossed a rolled fresh hide on the counter. "It was a C Bar cow they butchered, all right."

"Well?" Ted Holliver said.

The constable mopped his perspiring face with the palm of his hand. "Maybe Phin Clayton bought it from Buck."

"Maybe," Ted said. "Let's ask him."

The first wash of excitement had died down and the heat-smothered street was deserted except for the men in front of Mike Dewy's saloon. The constable hadn't even asked Ted for his gun. This was new to Wilbur, this law enforcing. He hadn't looked for any of this when he took the job.

The constable and Ted and the six townsmen stepped outside and they felt the blast of the heat, and then they saw Buck Holliver and the C Bar crew riding slowly up the street. Buck reined up sharp and dismounted.

"I want to talk to you, Ted," Buck Holliver said. "Just you alone. Wilbur, you and the rest of the boys stay out of it."

"Buck, listen to me—" The constable's voice was high pitched.

"I said stay out of it, Wilbur." Buck Holliver stepped out into the street, and behind him the men of the C Bar crew let hands carelessly drop to gun butts. "I want to talk to you, Ted."

Ted walked out into the street. He took two steps forward and Buck took two steps forward and then they both stopped and they were sweating. "I got a fresh C Bar hide in there, Buck," Ted said, and he barely jerked his head toward the drug store. "They were butchering one of your steers up at Phin Clayton's sheep camp when I rode by this morning. You been selling beef to Phin Clayton, Buck?"

Ted was looking straight into Buck's

eyes and he could see Buck's thoughts because they were so much like his own thoughts.

That's right, Buck, he thought to himself. It's simple as hell when you stop to think of it, ain't it? Nobody would think about a rich man stealing beef, but a rich man might figure things out a long ways ahead. Maybe if you and me had trouble, Walt and Maybelle would sell out, trying to stop it. Nobody would give a damn much what happened to you and me, Buck, except Walt and Maybelle. You know how they are.

That's what Buck Holliver was thinking. It was in his eyes and in the way his mouth twisted and the way the perspiration started running down his left cheek. He was relieved and he was glad and it was there on his face, but he had said a lot of things and made a lot of threats and people were watching. A horse backs up slower than it goes ahead.

"To hell with that," Buck said. "You killed Pete Benton. They're saying you chased the kid all night and run him down. They're saying you gunned him down without giving him a chance."

Buck Holliver was repeating words, words that had been branded on his mind with the hot iron of anger. He was saying them without even thinking about them, and the sweat was running down both cheeks now and his mouth was twisting as if it hurt him to talk. It was hard for a man to back down. It was twice as hard for a man to admit he had been a fool. A man needed some kind of an out—just a crack in the door. Ted Holliver looked at his brother and he knew how Buck was feeling.

"Do you believe what they're saying, Buck?" Ted Holliver said. "If it had been Bobby, would you have gunned him down without a chance?"

That was the crack in the door. A man could hear things and repeat them and even build a fight over them, but a man had to look inside himself to see if he believed what he heard. They were alike, these two, and they had always done things alike.

Buck Holliver jerked his head toward the drug store. "Go get that hide, Ted," he said. "I ain't never sold no beef to Phin Clayton."

They found Clayton and the bearded man up at the big house. Phin Clayton was a smooth-talking man. He smiled and pre-



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tended he wasn't nervous and finally he couldn't pretend any more, not with Wilbur and six townsmen and Ted and Buck there, pointing to that fresh hide. He gripped the back of a chair to keep his hands from shaking. "If my men have been stealing C Bar beef they've been doing it without my knowledge. I'll see that proper steps are taken."

The bearded man started to jerk his gun from the holster. "Why damn you, Clayton!"

Ted and Buck Holliver were thinking alike. They both had guns in their hands, and standing there that way the resemblance between them was stronger than it had ever been.

"Reckon you better take Phin and his gunhawk up to The Dalles," Buck Holliver said. "Don't you reckon that's best, Ted?"

"They got a pretty good jail at The Dalles," Ted Holliver said.

Three men stayed to help the constable, and Ted and Buck went back outside into the glare of the sun. It was a strong sun, good for ripening grain. They walked together, not saying anything, and they saw the rig turn into the main street of the town. Walt was driving and Maybelle was wearing a blue velvet hat that tied under her chin with a ribbon. The brothers hailed Walt down and Ted said, "I didn't know you wanted anything in town, Walt. I could have brought it out."

"Or I could have had one of my boys drop it off, Walt," Buck Holliver said.

Maybelle looked at the twins and she started to cry a little bit, but then, that was common for her. Walt reached over and took one of her hands and she quit crying. And a little later, after the Holliver twins had ridden out of town together, arguing about some fool thing, Wilbur, the constable, went into his drug store, pushed over the lever on his single key cash register and took out a twenty dollar bill. He went up to Mike Dewy's saloon and put the twenty on the bar. "I want to buy drinks for the house," he said.

Everybody was in the saloon. They were talking loud and laughing louder and it was all false and strained and they were figuring things would never be the same again. Mike wiped the bar and brushed his mustache with the back of his hand. "What's got into you, Wilbur?" he said. "You ain't bought a drink for nobody in a good ten years."

That was a sort of insult, but Wilbur didn't feel it. "Nothing's got into me," he said. "I just feel like buying a drink for the house."

"Hey, everybody," someone yelled. "Wilbur wants to buy a drink!"

The men belied up to the bar, three deep around Wilbur. They drank and one man said, "This is the hottest summer I recollect."

"You call this hot?" said another. "I recollect one time in August—"

"August? It was the first of September!" Wilbur tasted his drink. It tasted good.

HE WOULDN'T BE LICKED

Chief Joseph, leader of the Nez Perce Indians, was an unusual redman. First of all he was a peaceable man. He didn't allow his warriors to scalp their victims, to rob white settlements, or to capture white women. Only when the government ordered him to move his tribe to a faraway reservation did he go on the warpath.

The struggle Chief Joseph made ranks with few in military history. It showed him to be one of the great military strategists of all time. With less than 200 warriors and burdened with over 400 women and children, he held off for a year every U.S. Army force in the West.

He outmaneuvered completely one U.S.

Army attacking him from the south. He routed another pressing down on him from the north. Pursued by these two armies as well as a third, the Chief moved his entire tribe on a lengthy 1,000 mile retreat—through southwest Montana and Idaho almost all the way to Canada.

Only 25 miles from the border he was stopped by the forces of General Miles which had made a mad cross-country dash. Even then, with only 40 active warriors, Chief Joseph held out five days—using military tactics General Miles himself considered worthy of the most brilliant West Point graduate.

D. W.



MAN KILLER



Three more riders, Johnny thought, and then. . .



By
HAL

HAMMOND

For the first time hard-riding Johnny Melton knew fear—for waiting for him in Chute Five was the one bronc in the world he couldn't fork.

IT WAS hot as blazes atop the corral where Johnny Melton sat sweating it out while the crowd in the grandstands yelled encouragement to the rider forking the bronc in the arena. The sweat that covered Johnny's spare frame wasn't entirely due to the heat. Angel Face, the most devilishly tricky horse that had ever done his stuff in a rodeo circuit, was the cause of most of that sweat. Three more riders before Johnny, and then. . .

Slim Peters crawled up beside him, a

rail-thin man with one arm permanently crooked from too many falls.

"The crowd likes it," he said as the whistle blew and the pick-up men rode out to get the rider.

"Yeah," Johnny answered, but his tone was bitter. "They like to see a bronc buster get busted. If he's lucky they give him a hand. If he's unlucky—" Johnny shrugged.

"You got to quit thinkin' of what happened to your brother," Slim said quietly. "In this game you're always flirting with

death. Steve knew that. The breaks just wasn't comin' his way that day or he'd a ridden Angel Face, instead of . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Instead of getting killed," Johnny said. "Famous one week, forgotten the next. People have short memories."

A big black came plunging out of Chute Three, twisting and turning. With a violent half turn in the air he came down with stiff-legged abruptness, unseating his rider and spilling him on his head and shoulders in the dust.

Johnny felt sick. Such sights had never bothered him before Steve got it just a week before. Now it would take all his will power to crawl over the chute and drop in to a saddle. Only yesterday he'd drawn Angel Face and hit the dirt in two seconds flat. He knew he could have ridden him—if he hadn't been scared silly. The bitter knowledge that he was afraid drove the fear deeper and deeper.

When he'd drawn today, he'd got Angel Face again. Two times running. The luck of the devil, and Johnny felt his muscles contract in spasmodic twitches. He looked at Angel Face, saddled and waiting in Chute Five. The animal's dark eyes were serenely placid; he stood quietly. He knew enough not to expend any energy until the chute opened. Then he exploded like dynamite.

The smell of dust and sweating horses bit into Johnny's nostrils, leaving him with an acrid sense of frustration. He saw the other riders eyeing him silently, and he seemed to see ridicule in those silent stares, as though they knew he was afraid, and because of this they were isolating him from themselves. *He, Johnny Melton, afraid of a horse.* He'd forked them ever since he was a kid and he'd ridden his way to being one of the top riders in the business. He should have been on the top of the heap this year. Either he or Steve.

His stomach rolled again with a wash of fear and revulsion. He was through. A man had to have confidence in himself when he forked a bronc. If he didn't he was sunk, and Johnny didn't have any more confidence in himself than a man would trying to jump a thirty-foot crevice in a glacier.

Sunny Marvin came crashing out of Chute Four on a wicked, stiff-legged cayuse that jarred the youngster's spine with every

pitch. Johnny heard his name called and he walked numbly toward Chute Five, fear beating hard against his temples.

Famous one day—forgotten the next. That was a bronc rider's lot. That, and six feet of earth, was all that Steve had gotten out of nine years of following the rodeo circuit. And Johnny was getting even less. Before this day was over he'd be forever tagged as a rider who'd lost his guts. He knew he'd never have the nerve to climb to the top of the chute and drop into the saddle on the back of Angel Face. It wasn't in him. He felt as empty as an egg shell after the insides were taken out.

But he kept on walking, the numbness spreading through his whole lean body, and as he walked he thought of what Steve had said only a few days before he was killed.

"We're on top of the pile, Johnny. If one of us draws Angel Face, he's going to wind up the year's top rider. I'd like to see you on the top of the pile, Johnny."

Steve was on the bottom of the heap, Johnny thought bitterly. As forgotten as if he'd died a hundred years ago. And Johnny was on the bottom of the heap, too. He was through. There was no more will power left in him. He was a fool to be walking toward Chute Five. When he failed to climb into that saddle, he'd be sitting there, showing his cowardice for all the crowd to see.

Slim Peters walked up beside him as he stopped. "You'll ride him today, Johnny," he said. "Yesterday was your off day. We all get 'em."

Johnny didn't answer, but bitterness came up and tasted like acid in his mouth. Yesterday had been his off day. Today he was through. The thought kept beating its way through his mind.

SOMEHOW Johnny got to the top of the chute and sat astride it, sweat feeling greasy all over his body. The wild look of wickedness in the eyes of the buckskin in the chute would have been a joyous challenge to him a week ago. Today it marked the final ignominious end of his career. He couldn't lower himself into the saddle on that twelve hundred pounds of killer any more than he could bring back Steve.

The crowd was tensely expectant. This was the ride they had been waiting to see: the killer horse who'd never been ridden

and Johnny Melton, ace rider, who'd gotten cold feet the day before and had been thrown in two seconds flat.

Dimly Johnny listened to the announcer's words slice through the silence.

"I've had numerous requests," the announcer said, "by riders who follow the circuit and by members of the audience, to dedicate this ride to the memory of one man. A man who spent nine years of his life helping you folks enjoy the type of sport you are now witnessing. He was a rider who never gave up. He took the bad with the good, and he took them both with a smile. He died with his boots on a week ago—but he's not forgotten. Such men as Steve Melton are never forgotten. Their spirits live on in the memories of those who follow the rodeo circuit, and live forever.

"It is only fitting, ladies and gentlemen, that the rider who should have this honor is the man who knew Steve Melton best—his brother, Johnny Melton, riding the horse that has never been ridden, Angel Face."

The crowd applauded loudly. Johnny

looked at the riders grouped here and there on the corral fence. Their glances were not isolating him. They were lending him their silent support, feeling his need, as each in turn had felt that need at some time or another during his rodeo career.

He felt the sympathy of the crowd reach out to him as he thought over the announcer's words. This ride was in memory of Steve. He wasn't forgotten. Johnny realized now why, for the second time in a row, he'd drawn Angel Face. It hadn't been luck. There had been a purpose behind it. A two-edged purpose. For the memory of Steve—and for his own self respect.

Johnny felt his muscles loosen, felt his confidence return in a swift surge. This ride was for Steve. Ten seconds after that chute opened, no one would be able to say that Angel Face had never been ridden.

Johnny smiled, waved an arm to the crowd, and slid into the saddle. The door of the chute opened. Ten seconds later the pick-up men were spurring out after him. . . .

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TOMMY TWO-GUN

The mere whisper of Peace Wilson's name had tamed the town without a shot—but his famous guns were powerless against a gunslick from his past.

By **GORDON R.
DICKSON**



TOMMY TWO-GUN ran his fingers over the two forty-fours as he did every morning before slipping them into the holsters that hung low, one on each side of him. The cylinders spun as smoothly as ever; the thin, strangely cut, awkward-looking butts gleamed with the same dull luster as always. But the thrill

that touching them always gave him was gone.

Sighing, he slid them lightly into the holsters and turned away from the bedroom mirror to go up front to the shop and open up. Time was, he thought, as he stepped out into the chill bite of the morning air and began to take down the

shutters from the shop windows, time was that putting on the guns was a sort of magic. The weight of them at his sides added meat to his shoulders and inches to his height; and he could forget the slight twist and drag of his lame leg. But no more. There was big trouble come to Dohone Pass, trouble too heavy to be lifted by the pleasure he took in the guns.

The wind from the snow on the high peaks of the Rockies bit through the thinness of his shirt. He shivered, carrying the last of the shutters inside, and moved over to make up a morning fire in the shop stove. The kindling, ready laid, caught fire from the sputtering lucifer match in his slim fingers, and the red glow of the flames lay warmly for a moment on his tools at the workbench, the racked guns on the wall. Satisfied that the pine chunks above the kindling would catch, he closed the stove door and turned to his work.

Tommy Two-Gun was a gunsmith and a good one. He was a good one because he loved guns—to work with, to carry and to shoot. To him, guns ranked just below living things in the scale of good things here on earth. A gun could fight for you. It could put a sick critter out of its misery. Or it could call for help when an accident in the cow country pinned you to the ground with a broken leg or suchlike. A lot of good could come from guns, besides a heap of bad. So said Tommy Two-Gun, and when he spoke so, people listened, for he was the best gunsmith west of Dodge City.

And if they had left it there, left him to be a gunsmith and nothing more, he would have been happy. For, beyond his work, there was nothing he wanted, unless maybe it was Kate Jennings, the sheriff's daughter. But the eyes of the countryside were too sharp, and its memory too good. Those eyes had seen the odd, seemingly awkward shape of the butts on his guns, gunbutts that an ordinary man would have had a hard time grasping firmly, let alone clamping on for a quick draw.

The memory had called to mind the name of a gunslick famous in the Texas cattle wars, a gunslick who wore two guns with odd-shaped butts and headed a bunch that notched their ears as yearling cattle are notched—as Tommy Two-Gun's ears were notched. And so, although they spoke

to the gunsmith politely and called him Tommy to his face, the name that they called him among themselves was the outlaw's name, Peace Wilson; and if there was trouble in the Pass, they came to him.

There was trouble now. The country was growing, and the town of Dohone Pass was growing with it. The mountain grass was rich, and spreads prospered. The number of hired hands had grown in the five years since Tommy Two-Gun had come here to set up his gunsmith shop—five years since Peace Wilson had unaccountably disappeared from the Texas plains—and among those hired hands there had naturally been a few hardcases. There had been trouble in the town, solved in the same way—an ultimatum to simmer down or get out of the territory, issued by middle-aged, thick-set Sheriff Jennings, but backed by a little man with odd-shaped butts on his twin guns; a little man who was never a deputy and who said nothing, but was always standing by when the ultimatum was issued.

BUT this was new trouble—big trouble. A new man had taken over the Golden Wheel Saloon. His name was Jerry Malone, a big man and affable, but who quickly began to accumulate a crowd of hard-faced men who seemed to have no occupation but to hang around Jerry's saloon and amuse themselves with the gambling layouts that Jerry was bringing in. Little by little the Saturday nights in town were getting wilder. Little by little, the week-nights were becoming as busy as the old Saturday nights had been. It was up to Sheriff Jennings to do something; but this was no case of a drifter, clearly in the wrong, to be run out of town. There had been no complaints about Jerry and his new layout—yet.

So there was trouble in the air, and it was with no surprise that Tommy, turning away from the shop stove, saw Jennings and his daughter Katie coming along the boardwalk and up to the door of his shop.

He moved across the floor with the slight hesitation in his walk that his limp gave him, and opened the door for them. "Morning, Sheriff," he said. "Morning, Katie."

Jennings grunted in reply, strode heavily into the shop and dropped into a chair

by the stove, not seeming to notice that this left his daughter standing. Tommy turned, and going back into his living quarters, brought out another chair for the girl.

"Thanks, Tommy," she said, smiling at him, and sat down. He nodded gravely, and turned back to her father.

"What can I do for you, Sheriff?" he asked.

The older man took off his hat and wiped his brow with a large silk handkerchief. "It's Malone," he said, bluntly. "Tommy, I wish I'd taken your advice."

Kate looked at him wonderingly.

"What advice, Dad?"

"Now, hush up, girl," said her father impatiently. "You said you wanted to talk to Tommy, so I let you come along. I didn't mean for you to butt in on my talk."

"Nothing much, anyhow, Kate," Tommy's slow words cut in on the sheriff's sharp ones. "I just told your dad I figured the time to crack down on Malone was when the first of those drifters began living down at the Wheel."

"Well, Holy Hannah!" exploded Jennings. "What could I do, Tom? I can't do nothing unless there's a complaint. Malone didn't complain. Nobody complained."

"Cases like this, Sheriff," Tommy's slow answer came back, "might be a good idea to invent a complaint. Reckon there's a dozen of those boys down there now. One'd be a lot easier than twelve to get rid of."

Jennings fidgeted.

"If they'd do something wrong—" he began.

"They won't do nothing wrong," said Tommy. "Malone'll see to that. I told you I seen this happen in other places. Man like Malone comes in and lies plenty doggo until he's got a crew with a hardcase to ramrod them. Then he begins taking over the town. First they do one little thing and get away with that. Then it's bigger and bigger things, and the first thing you know they're law in the town. They run the town and they've got a stranglehold on the money spent in this territory. Most of it goes over the faro tables and into the roulette wheel, and there's nobody to squawk to if they're crooked."

Jennings waved his hand in embarrassed anger to cut the flow of the younger man's words.

"All right, all right!" he said. "I should have listened to you."

"Then you can listen to me, now," Tommy went on. "I told you those dozen gunnies down there aren't dangerous until Malone gets a real man to head them. There's still time to bust this up for good. You figure yourself out something like they've been disturbing the peace and give them all twenty-four hours to get out. You and me'll take care of it right now."

He stopped talking and looked at the sheriff, but the other hesitated. The flush of embarrassment was still on the older man's face and he avoided Tommy's eyes. The silence between them lengthened in the little shop.

"How come not, Sheriff?" said Tommy at last.

Jennings looked deliberately away from him.

"I waited too long, Tommy," he answered, in a low voice. "Like you said. Malone's got his ramrod, now. Feller by the name of Latigo Spence."

HE LOOKED back at Tommy, and his eyes searched the younger man's face, as his daughter was doing. Outside, a high cloud swept suddenly across the face of the sun and a dimness fell on the little shop. In the shadow, Tommy's face was hard to read.

"Did you ever hear of him, before, Tommy?" the sheriff asked finally.

"I heard of him," Tommy himself did not recognize the voice that came from his lips. It was cold and dead.

"Then maybe you know something about him," Jennings went on. "I reckon he's got a rep as a gunfighter?"

"He's got a rep," again the answer came in that dry, lifeless tone.

"Well, then." The sheriff's hesitation was painful to see. "I reckon he's kind of out of my class. I never been in much fighting except a little trouble around here; and while I got the authority, I don't suppose a feller like this Latigo would pay much attention to that. And maybe having you just standing around wouldn't make much difference to him, either."

He stood up and took a step toward the silent gunsmith. His voice was frankly pleading, now.

"Look, Tommy, just this once you've

got to let me deputize you regular. I'll side you, but you've got to make the arrest. Hell, I wouldn't know what to do. He'd make a monkey out of me and that'd be worse for law and order than having you—"

His voice died before the stony immobility of Tommy's face. There was silence for a long time in the shop, and then Tommy turned his back on them and stared out the window. The words came, dry as dust, from his lips.

"I'll have to think it over, Jennings."

There was a second more of silence, then behind him he heard a scrape of bootheels, the slam of the door, and the tread of a heavy man moving away down the boardwalk.

He stayed where he was, staring out at the high white peaks of the Rockies, and his heart within him hung heavy and cold as their frozen peaks. There was no use. There was never any use. The twin guns at his belt made him a marked man and would until the day he died.

He turned back from the window and was startled to see Katie, still standing in the same spot, watching him. She was a tall, blue-eyed girl with tawny hair and a ready laugh. Now she looked bewildered.

He stared at her, a question in his eyes.

"I don't understand these things," she said. "I've seen you with Dad when we had trouble with some pretty bad men—is this Latigo Spence different in some way?"

Tommy sighed. He wanted to explain, but the proper words would not come. He thought for a minute, and then did the best he could.

"Yes, Katie," he said. "He's different. He's—it's like a wolf is different from just a mean-mad dog. A dog, he gets himself all worked up and you can see him coming after you from a long ways away. A wolf, it's his regular business; he just sits perfectly quiet and waits patient-like until you look away for a second, and then he tears your throat out. That's Latigo. Guns are his business."

Katie's face whitened. She drew in her breath sharply, and when the words came out, they were like a slap in the face.

"But," she said, "they're your business, too, aren't they?"

It was like a physical shock. He stiffened where he stood, and the words he

wanted for his answer would not come to him. His throat worked, but before he could speak, Katie was talking again.

"Listen!" she said. "I came down here because I knew what Dad was going to ask you. I came down because I was going to ask you not to do it. I was going to ask you that because I was afraid for you, afraid you'd get hurt—because I love you—"

"Katie!" The cry was wrenched from his throat. He took an involuntary step toward her, lifting his arms to her.

She held up a hand to stop him.

"Wait!" she said. "I thought that because I didn't understand you. I believed that you would jump at the chance because of the gunfighter you were, and I was willing to offer myself as a bribe to make up for your looking like a coward by avoiding this Latigo. And what do I find?" Her voice held nothing but bitterness and scorn for him now. "I find that the ex-gunfighter, the man who showed so big against ordinary saddle tramps, was ready to turn tail at the sight of a real hired gunman. I find my bribe was unnecessary—that you're not only a coward but a bully."

"Katie!" the words burst from his lips.

"Listen to me. I'm not—"

"Why, no," she said, with an angry smile. "You're just living up to your name, aren't you—*Peace Wilson*."

He froze, suddenly. The skin of his face drew taut and his mouth thinned to a straight line that was completely expressionless. It was the face of an utter stranger and Katie, angry as she was, recoiled before it.

"If you've nothing more to say, ma'am," said the cold expressionless mouth, "I'll be wishing you good day."

FOR a long time he stood there after she left, a savage, hunched figure, his long fingers hooked lightly around the thin butts of his guns. Then, gradually, the tension began to leak out of him, and he straightened up with a long sigh. He sat down at the workbench and, laying his hands palm up on the smooth wood, looked at them.

They were strange hands, long and thin and powerful, with spatulate fingers; the hands of a musician or an artist or—there was no point in not facing it—the hands of a gunfighter. He clenched them once

or twice, and the slim tendons stood out sharply, pushing against the tanned skin of his wrists. He laughed to himself once, bleakly, a low, self-mocking laugh. He had felt alone in his life, but never so utterly alone and misunderstood. There was no help for it. He must gamble—a gamble in which no one else, neither Jennings nor Katie, would realize what stakes of his were on the board. He laughed again, rose from the workbench and went out along the street to the sheriff's office.

The morning sun was rising, taking the mountain chill from the air. He passed the batwing doors of the Golden Wheel, from which issued the sleepy tones of a few early risers engaged in desultory conversation over their eye-openers. He continued on to the sheriff's office.

Jennings was seated at the desk as he pushed his way in through the door. The older man looked up from the dodger he was reading.

"Well, Tommy?" he asked.

Tommy nodded.

"We'll have to wait until Latigo gets up," he said. "And that probably won't be for an hour or two. After that, it shouldn't take long."

Jennings nodded in his turn. He took a badge from the drawer of his desk, and, getting heavily to his feet, he swore Tommy in and pinned it on his shirt.

Then followed two hours of nerve-wracking waiting. The sheriff read his reward dodgers, fiddled with papers on his desk and fidgeted. Tommy sat still, as if lost in deep thought, his legs stretched straight out before him and the thin blue smoke of his cigarette drifting upward in the still air of the room. It was very quiet and the rustle of the sheriff's papers sounded loudly in the ears of the two men. Finally, after what seemed to have been an interminable time of waiting, Jennings pulled a heavy silver watch from his pocket.

"Noon," he announced. "Reckon we might as well get going."

"Reckon so," said Tommy. He rose to his feet, watched as Jennings loosened the gun in his holster, but made no move to touch the walnut of his own twin butts. Then they went out the door of the office and down the boardwalk.

The batwing doors loomed in front of them. They pushed through, into the semi-

gloom of the Golden Wheel's interior. A long bar faced them, going down the left hand side of the room, and there were tables scattered about at the right. The gambling equipment stood deserted along the back wall.

There were eight men at the bar, all of them hangers-on of Malone's. Malone himself sat at one of the tables, alone with a tall, thin man in black shirt and white sombrero, eating a breakfast that the bartender had probably brought across the street from the cafe opposite.

"That's him," said Jennings, and they walked the length of the bar, their boot-heels sounding loudly in the silent room, to the table at which Malone and the other sat.

Malone looked up as they stopped in front of the table, but the man in the black shirt continued to eat, his eyes fixed on his plate. There was an air of lithe strength and unconcern about him, and he disregarded the two men in front of him as easily as if he had been deaf.

"Latigo Spence?" said Tommy.

"The same," answered Latigo, without looking up. He held his fork in his left hand, and lifted pieces of ham with it from the plate to his mouth. His other hand rested carelessly, palm down, on the edge of the table.

"You're under arrest," said Tommy.

Latigo made no answer, merely continued to eat. But Malone spoke.

"Oh, yes, Latigo," he said to the man beside him. "This is our local gunsmith and—" he squinted at the badge on Tommy's shirt—"our new deputy sheriff, I see. Don't tell me you're going to have trouble with our new deputy, Latigo? He's not a good man to have trouble with. He calls himself Tommy Two-Gun, but long ago people figured from his guns and his ear-notches that he must be Peace Wilson. You've heard of Peace Wilson?"

"I heard of Peace," said Latigo. He raised his eyes at last from his plate, and Tommy tensed. The gamble was on. The stakes were on the board.

"Yes," said Latigo, looking Tommy full in the face. His hand spread out slightly on the edge of the table. "I heard of Peace. I even seen Peace once, when he was dying of penumonia in Dodge City. That's why I know that this here feller ain't Peace,

even if he does wear Peace's guns and have his ears notched." His black eyes gleamed like chips of obsidian in his thin face, boring into Tommy.

"Ain't that true, feller?"

His words boomed loudly in the empty hall, reverberating back from the rafters. A curious numbness crept over Tommy and the black eyes held him like a vise. The gamble was lost. As if from a long distance away, he heard his own voice answering, oddly flat and impersonal.

"Yes, it's true. Peace died in Dodge City, five years ago."

HE HAD been sitting alone in the shop for a long time, and it was getting toward evening. The light was fading on the street outside. No one had come in and—his fingers strayed upward to the touch of hard metal on his shirt—the sheriff had not even come to reclaim his badge. No one would come. He was a failure and a fake in the eyes of the honest people in the town. He was a nobody—a thing to be despised in the eyes of the dishonest element. He would be left severely alone—ignored—until the pressure forced him to pack up and move elsewhere.

There was not much point in delay. He might as well start packing. But, although he told himself this, he did not move.

"I done wrong," he said finally, to the empty shop. "I done wrong."

Heavily, he got to his feet and unbuckled the shining cartridge belt with its twin holsters with the heavy guns. He unwrapped it reverently from around his waist and laid it gently on the workbench in front of him.

"I'm sorry, Peace," he whispered to it. "I sure am sorry, but I can't use them.

They done a good job for a while, anyhow."

He turned away from the gleaming guns, and from a peg on another wall lifted down a belt with a single holster, a plain, worn cartridge belt with its leather black with age, but like everything in Tommy's shop, well oiled and in good condition. He lifted a box from the shelf above it and took a single gun which, like the belt, was old but well cared for. He lifted shells from a box and thumbed them into the gun and into the loops of the belt. He buckled the belt around him and slid the gun into the holster. Then he took one more gun from the rack, filled it and slid its barrel beneath the cartridge belt, butt forward on his left side.

Then he went out.

He went down the street in the fading light and stopped in front of the Golden Wheel. He stood there for a while, waiting. And then, when he saw one of the ranch hands ride in and tie to the hitching rail, he stepped forward and spoke to him. "Do me a favor, friend," he said. "Tell Latigo I'm here. Tell him to come out."

The ranch hand stared at him, and at the single holster at his side. Then, puzzlement wrinkling his brow, he turned away and went in through the batwing doors.

The noise of voices and music went on for a few seconds longer inside the Golden Wheel, then hushed themselves. There was the sound of boots, a measured tread on the floorboard. Then the batwings swung wide and a man stood framed in the entrance.

It was Latigo.

He stood there for a second, looking at Tommy, who stood some twenty yards off on the far side and down the street away.

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Then, slowly, he began to descend the steps, and Tommy himself began to walk forward. As he walked, he spoke. He had just time to say what he wanted before the guns came up.

"I just wanted to tell you, Latigo," he said. "I was with Peace for a long time. And Tommy Two-Gun Denvers—that's my right name."

The guns flashed red in the gathering darkness, and the thunder of their explosions rolled along the streets. A terrific hammer blow seemed to strike Tommy on the right side and spin him half-way around. But that was all right, because his right-hand gun was still in its holster, where he always kept it. It was his left hand gun, the one that had been stuck so awkwardly through the cartridge belt, that filled his left hand. A red mist thickened before his eyes and he saw Latigo through it, still on his feet, and still walking toward him. He had just time, before sight failed him, to shoot once again. . . .

* * *

"I done wrong," Tommy muttered to himself. "I done wrong."

"Hush," said a voice, and he opened his eyes to see Katie bending over him. She moved her hand and a cool wet cloth wiped his forehead. Her eyes were shiny with tears.

"Katie," he said, "I promised Peace to wear his guns. He always wanted to quit

and live straight, but the wild blood in him wouldn't let him do it. He wanted me to use his guns for good to make up for all the bad he done with them—"

"Hush," she said. "Hush, you mustn't talk."

"But I couldn't use them," he went on heedlessly. "Them handles weren't cut for any hands but Peace's. And I done wrong wearing them, for I should of known that sooner or later I'd have to back up my bluff."

"Lie still now," the woman-voice was sweet in his ears.

"I killed him, didn't I?" he said.

"Yes, Tommy." It was a man's voice now, the sheriff's, deep and strong. Tommy strained to see him, but beyond the oval of Katie's face, everything was blurred. "That last shot of yours got him."

Tommy relaxed.

"I reckoned it would," he murmured, more to himself than to Katie and the others. "All I had was that one trick, that belt gun for a left-hand draw where I'd have to turn sideways to get at it, but it threw him off enough so's his first shot didn't stop me. Anyhow, it's all right now."

He looked up into the eyes of Katie and read there the promise of a future in which the taint of an outlaw no longer clung to him.

"Yes, Tommy," she said, smiling through her tears, "it's all right now."

DEVIL'S LUCK

Jan Szyzphl came from faraway Czechoslovakia to labor in Nevada's mines. For several years he worked for the Noonday Mining Company, never missing a day, and never missing a pay-check.

Jan was a bit of a miser. His aim was to lay by as much money in as short a time as possible, then to go back to his native land to become a man of substance.

Jan lived as frugally as was consistent with staying alive and furnishing muscle power for the mining company. He had no faith in banks, and he feared thieves might get hold of his money should it be whispered around that he had a lot of cash on his person or hidden around his shanty. Consequently he never cashed one of his pay-checks but stacked them away in glass jars and buried these in the dry desert soil where only he knew the hiding places.

And then came the awful day that the Noonday Mining Company went bankrupt. All of Jan's carefully hoarded checks became scraps of worthless paper overnight.

—R.V.

Next

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

Published

August 3rd

Howdy, pard. A hard-hitting novelette about a gunman who couldn't stop killing is waiting for you in the next issue, when Clark Gray bares the tortured soul of "The Reluctant Pistoletier." Richard Morley had first notched his six when a drunken kid forced his hand. Since then he had killed five other men—and didn't see any end in sight.



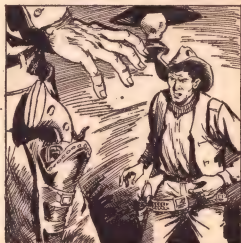
It was a damnation trail for sure—and a mighty dangerous one. For Morley never knew when a dead man's clan would strike without warning. . . . He was peaceably cutting hay when the two Johnson boys opened fire. . . .



Morley's magic gun pulled him out of that one alive—and sent one drygulcher to hell. But that made Number Seven, and how could he make lovely Helen understand? She didn't want to marry a killer—and one day become a widow.



Life became a waking nightmare as Morley waited for the vengeance bullet that would finally get him. At least four men wanted his hide, he knew. Then he learned they were all in town for a pow-wow—their business, the life of Richard Morley.



But the last great challenge came from another quarter—a desperate kid. When he called him a killer and dared him to draw, Morley suddenly knew this was it. . . . Clark Gray will tell the complete story in the next issue.

WAGONS TO

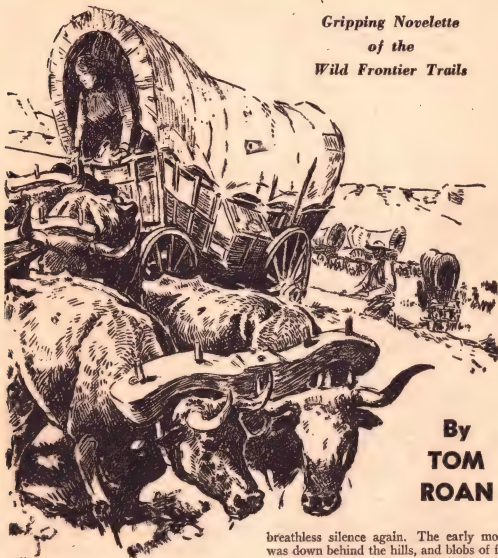
Whittle was prancing his horse and shouting orders like a slave driver.



Up and down the untamed wilderness, smoke signals called the dread Cheyennes to war—for Yellow Bull, their paleface nemesis, was pushing his wagon train through hell!

NOWHERE . . .

*Gripping Novelette
of the
Wild Frontier Trails*



By
**TOM
ROAN**

CHAPTER

1

Yellow Bull

A night bird uttered one faintly melodious call somewhere across the river where the blue-gray bluffs lined the eastern side. A pair of keen ears instantly registered the sound, making certain that it was a bird, and then there was only the still and

breathless silence again. The early moon was down behind the hills, and blobs of fog and midnight darkness made a dark pool of gloom under the great bench of cliffs on the western side of the stream.

For more than an hour this same tensed hush had filled the air; not so much as the whispery sound of a ripple stirred on the dark and glassy face of the river. Phil Seldon continued his vigil, squatting in a narrow pocket in the cliffs with a thin screen of brush in front of him, his moccasined feet flat on a dry stone near the water.

They were still looking for him, silently stalking figures who could move with less noise than creeping lizards, like shadows blending themselves with the shadows. No patience surpassed that of the Sioux and the Cheyenne out here on the vast and lonely frontier of the Montana-Dakotas in the wild and bloody days of the '70's—and especially when these redskins somehow knew they were hunting a paleface called Yellow Bull, one of the most dangerous army scouts ever sent among them.

To other men it might have meant the end of things; desperation would have overwhelmed them. His horse had been killed from under him two miles up the Yellowstone. Four Indians had been shot from their ponies, one of them a young chief, in the brief battle, as a dying bay horse and a fighting paleface took them by surprise and tore through them like a cannon-ball suddenly exploding among them.

Once setting him afoot and fighting him for a mile down the Yellowstone, the Indians had found him more deadly on the ground than on horseback. Tonight they hated him more than they had ever hated him.

At the same time they admired him more than ever. He who took the long and golden scalp of Yellow Bull and placed the battle markings of the kill on his feathers would be a great warrior. All of them had long wanted his scalp. Many had died trying to take it. Others were doomed to carry the marks of his wounds to their dying day—and boast proudly all their lives of having met the deadly one in battle and lived to tell about it.

Now Yellow Bull was cut off here with miles to go yet before dawn, and his patience was waning. Life or death lay ahead of him. Somewhere was a wagon train filled with men, women and children that he must join, for he knew that Long Lance, the dreaded Cheyenne, would be waiting for them.

Easing upward like a ghost, dark buckskins blending with the deep shadows, he stood within two inches of six feet, lean and hard, yet broad and deep-chested. A man lacking three more years before he reached thirty, he had grown old as a scout. He had been one since he was eighteen, and his face and body were scarred with bullet, arrow, knife, with some marks left by the

flames of a torture pole to go with the rest of them. Even if they wanted his scalp, many Indians yet trusted him as a paleface with a straight tongue.

With the shadows deepening and darkening clouds beginning to mottle the sky, he started moving on, six-shooters forward on their belts, a rifle on the crook of his left arm and a ten-inch knife against his stomach, held there by a strap around his neck and sewed to the long blade's beaded sheath.

One thing was certain. He had to have another horse. The only way to get one was to steal it or kill another Indian and take it. It depended merely on how he came upon the horse. He knew there would be horses and ponies somewhere above him. Walking noiselessly, he moved toward a sharp spur in the foot of the cliffs. He heard a nicker before he had gone more than eighty yards.

He swung into another narrow break in the rocks. Waiting and listening, he caught the faintest hint of slipping sand. A few seconds later the shadowy outline of a feathered head was easing around the spur, two keen eyes taking stock of the darkness ahead. Then the feathered head moved closer.

The creeping figure had cleared the point of the spur when Yellow Bull, with all the silent fury Indians talked about, struck without warning. The butt of his rifle swung forward. It caught the unsuspecting redskin on the temple. With only a hint of a grunt he dropped forward, landing in a sprawl on his face and stomach. Before he could start to rise, the long knife from the sheath had swung, going downward straight for the heart. In the single stroke it was buried to the hilt. A jerk pulled the dripping blade free, and the man who was Yellow Bull stepped back, waiting and listening again.

He was just in time. Another creeping figure was coming up on the other side of the spur. This time the grinding and slipping sound of sand underfoot was louder. Whoever it was, he was not half as noiseless as the first. Neither was the second one as cautious. A big head poked around the spur with three feathers showing on top of it, a blanket pulled up and around the man's heavy shoulders.

It was white man to white man now, and

just as swift, just as silent and deadly as the encounter with the redskin a few moments before. The feathers on his head were enough for Phil Seldon. He downed him with the same blow from the rifle's butt. As the man dropped, he grunted. It was his last grunt on earth. The long knife drove to the hilt, and two men were dead—a renegade white sprawled across the body of either a Sioux or a Cheyenne.

STRAIGHTENING, Yellow Bull again listened. In a few more moments he was moving forward, stepping gingerly over the dead. A cautious look showed him two horses on a sandy strip at the foot of the cliffs, no more than fifty yards away. Hugging the shadows as well as he could, he glided forward. He was close to a long-legged and decidedly handsome yellow horse before a mounted figure on a pony popped out of a pocket of shadow ahead of him, another fifty yards beyond the two horses.

Death was leering again. He moved on quietly to the yellow horse, seeing an excellent saddle even in the darkness. By this time the figure on the pony was heeling his pony into a gallop—a young buck, Seldon saw. Young or old made little difference. The muzzle of his rifle swung forward. Its crash and a gash of flame tumbled the figure on the pony backward. The noise reverberated up and down the river, the silence of the night splintered with the fierce echoes.

A jump carried Seldon into the saddle of the yellow horse. Wheeling him, spurring him, he headed down the river. High above him to the right and left, startled figures were popping up, staring down on

the fleeing horseman, blank amazement in their eyes. As he turned another bend, going like something flying close to the sandy ground, his voice came up to the rim, wild and full of mocking laughter. The first four words were in Sioux. The next four were Cheyenne.

"I am Yellow Bull! I am Yellow Bull!"

A dozen more shots now filled the night with their crashes, and an eagle-like scream of rage with them, but it was all too late. A rider with flying yellow hair on a flying yellow horse was turning the bend, going on down the river. Yellow Bull and his golden scalp were still together. . . .

Dawn was in the air when he topped the last tall ridge and headed down the long slope toward the floor of a rimrocked valley that was shaped like a great bowl three miles wide, and a three-day drive west of the Missouri River. Never in his life had he ridden a better horse, an animal shining now in the morning light as if he had been painted with gold; and never in his life had he dreamed of owning such a saddle, bridle and saddle bags. It was a Mexican outfit, heavy with silver and gold. Like the horse it was worth a thousand dollars—both no doubt stolen somewhere by the renegade white he had killed back there on the Yellowstone River, and the true owner murdered without warning on some lonely trail.

His eyes were on a big wagon train in the distance, and he was scowling. There were between seventy and eighty wagons down there, everything from huge old prairie schooners with their sway-backed canvas tops to three or four one-horse wagons covered with duck. Whoever had picked the camp site could not have found a more dangerous spot, and whoever had ordered

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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the arrangement of the wagons had given little or no thought to compactness. They were strung out down a rippling stream, hugging the shelter of wide-spreading old cottonwoods and so close to the water's edge that any sizable flash flood pouring out of the hills without warning might sweep them all into hopeless wreckage and drown half the people in the train.

Some of the people in the wagon train had been up and stirring long before the first streak of dawn. A dozen breakfast fires were burning down there now, men and women at work around them. But others were just starting their fires, and some of the wagons looked as if their owners were still asleep inside them.

When Phil Seldon looked at the cattle and horse herd, he could not help feeling that he was riding down the long slope to meet people who were hopelessly ignorant. Horses, oxen and mules were scattered among the knolls north of the camp. If there were a guard at all, it was made up of two gangling boys, one with an old muzzle-loader shotgun on his shoulder, the other with a small rifle. A feeling of helplessness came over him.

He reached the first two big prairie schooners spaced forty feet apart, with a breakfast fire burning between them. A stout woman and a tall, dark-haired girl were just ready to start serving the morning meal.

"Good morning, stranger!" A big, square-shouldered, square-jawed man of fifty-odd stepped from behind the wagon nearest the creek and strode forward as Seldon dismounted. At a glance Seldon saw that he was garbed in gray. A dark beard hung from his chin like a bull's tail, and a wide black hat was on the back of his head. "I'm Captain Elmer Whittle, in charge of the train. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Philip Seldon of the army scouts." Something in Whittle's manner annoyed him and his voice sounded flat. He dropped his reins, and the yellow horse lowered his muzzle to the rich grass underfoot. "I've been in the saddle most of the night. I'd like a cup of coffee."

"Well—why, maybe so." Whittle turned and glanced toward the fire. "If we can't spare it this morning—"

"We can, Mr. Whittle." The girl had

turned, tall and decidedly beautiful at the first glance. Her hands and face were amazingly fair for one with such blue-black hair and dark eyes. "We will be very happy to have you for breakfast, sir."

"My step-daughter," Whittle jerked a thumb at her, his smile thin and hard. "Ellen Queen."

And rightfully named, thought Seldon, when it came to the Queen part. "Thank you, Miss Queen."

"You are more than welcome," she answered. "We have plenty of everything."

SOMETHING was wrong between this Whittle and his step-daughter, but it was none of Phil Seldon's business. He was soon taking his place on the grass not far from the fire. The girl brought him a big plate and a large cup of coffee. Whittle had the top of a large grub-box for himself.

"My wife." He jabbed a thumb at the woman. "Mrs. Whittle."

The woman merely nodded, looking afraid to speak.

"Seldon, eh?" Whittle looked at him over a big cup of coffee poised just in front of his lips. "Seems I heard that name on the way up the east side of the Missouri. Wouldn't be the man the redskins call Yellow Bull, would you?"

"They call me that, yes," nodded Seldon. "Most of them."

"Then, by jove, we seem to have distinguished company, Anna!" Whittle glanced at his wife, making it a point to ignore the girl. "Down the way I heard his scalp was worth a lot of money among the redskins. Some one said it'd buy a squaw for some enterprising young buck."

"The prettiest Cheyenne or the prettiest Sioux," Seldon said, a strange glint beginning to show in his hard blue eyes. "I'm saving it for the Bannocks. They are fairer, taller, straighter, slimmer." He looked up, straight at Ellen Queen. "They have big dark eyes and blue-black hair. Dangerous, maybe," he smiled, "but danger is my calling." He shrugged and reached for his coffee. "I was probably never meant to die in bed. It'd be," he shrugged again, "so uninteresting."

"You're the real thing, aren't you!" Ellen Queen was suddenly looking down at him with sparkling eyes. "I've heard about

you, too. Yellow Bull! Yes, I like that." "Ellen!" Elmer Whittle started to rise from his box. "What are you saying? We don't know this man at all, and—"

"And what?" Seldon's hard stare had cut Whittle short. "There's a saying somewhere—something about a mouse being able to look at a queen! As long as this mouse is around he'll look at her, just so Miss Queen doesn't mind."

"This is damned brazen, if you ask me!" Elmer Whittle threw his cup in one direction, his plate in another, and came to his feet. His smoky-gray eyes were flashing. "As a rule we've met respectable men—" "Sit down, Whittle!" Seldon pointed to the grub-box, rising straight to his feet without apparent effort. "One of my foolish habits is to speak my mind wherever I go. Beautiful women are not too many on the frontier—"

"Yal-ler Bull!" cut in Whittle, dropping back on the box with a short, harsh laugh. "Come on up, people!" He waved his hand to others in the train. "Come meet the Yal-ler Bull!"

"Yellow Bull it is!" Seldon turned and glared at the crowd, madder now than blue hell. "I'm as proud of it as old Long Lance of the Cheyennes is proud of his name!"

"Long Lance!" Whittle was laughing now. "Does he, too, smell of horses and blood and gunpowder?"

"I speak of only myself." Seldon took a pace toward him. "I smell of horses, and I like it! I live with 'em, drink with them in the streams and pools, and sometimes sleep with them. There's blood on my sleeves. I've noticed that. Sometimes it squirts a little when you cut a man's heart out in the dark, and I had to kill to get through to this train during the night."

"In my left arm there's a bullet hole through the flesh, with a dirty handkerchief tied around it. Had I met somebody here more civil than you, Whittle, I might ask for a little scrap of clean rag. But I'll get along without it as I have many times before—"

"Wait!" Ellen Queen stepped quickly in front of him. "If you have a wound I'll dress it."

"Thank you, ma'am, but just wait." He held up his hand. "I didn't come here to start a row. I came here to ask Whittle to turn this train off the trail he's following.

If he'll listen to reason, he will swing back as far as the Missouri and hit the north trail. I'm told you're bound for the Valley of the Musselshell. To go on as you're going now means a wipe-out—a massacre of men, women and children before another twenty-four hours."

He lifted his hand and pointed. "Long Lance is waiting for you in those hills. With him are Cheyennes, Sioux, Crow, Pawnee, Ute, and maybe some Comanche ranging far north after the buffalo hunters who are invading their hunting grounds. Continue the way you're going, Whittle," he glared at him now, "and they'll wipe you out—to the last suckling baby in this outfit!"

"What is this crazy talk!" Whittle lunged to his feet, so white-faced he looked ready to faint. "I can handle this train! I know what to do with these people! I'm not afraid of this country—and I'm not afraid of Indians, either!"

"You don't actually know a damned thing, Mr. Whittle." Seldon looked ready to laugh at him, but there was a low, grinding sound in his voice. "You're like a lot of fools who go to a strange country. The minute you hit the ground you want to run every damned thing in sight. The looks of this wagon train, this camp, would tell any fool west of the Missouri that you don't know anything about Indian country or the elements themselves. Any man would know that a cloudburst in those hills behind you, miles away, would wash this entire train clear back to the Missouri and drown half its people."

"Get out of this camp!" Whittle raised both fists straight in the air as if so angry he was about to pull the heavens down. "Get out before I throw you out!"

"What army are you calling on to help you?" Seldon was laughing at him now, no longer able to hold it. "Surely now you don't want me to take you by that beard-handle on your chin and throw you in the creek!"

"Wait, please!" Laughter dancing to the depths of her dark eyes, Ellen Queen was back in front of him, a small black case now in her hands. "Let's get off that buckskin shirt and dress that arm. It's going to be a pleasure to boast in the future of having been one who dressed a wound for Yellow Bull!"

CHAPTER

2

Short-Cut to Hell

The fight had gone out of Elmer Whittle, but he still raged against this damned scout who'd been sent to guide his wagon train. Seldon's wound had been dressed, and the people of the wagon train had welcomed him. But Whittle would not stop growling.

"Turn back to the Missouri?" he snapped. "Hell fire, no! Three days here, three days back, and God knows how many more days around the other way!"

"We were four days getting here." Ellen Queen was merciless. "It would be four back, the way you drive and the late starts you always make in the morning. I believe in following Yellow Bull."

"Wimmin ain't runnin' this train, Miss Queen!" A tall, long-necked Missourian had stepped forward, tobacco juice making two dark streaks down the sides of his chin. "Men bein' the stronger, an' men, havin' more solid wisdom—"

"Wisdom!" Ellen Queen had laughed in his face. "Where and when did one of Solomon's dogs ever bite you?"

Laughter shook the camp. Only four big, bearded and hard-eyed men in buckskins had taken sides with Whittle. Phil Seldon did not yet know what kind of men they were, but they were short of everything that would mark them as settlers. They owned two of the huge old prairie schooners, each drawn by four yokes of the largest oxen in the train.

"In a way we ain't just settlers," one of them had admitted. "We aim to start a big store on Hangin' Woman Crick, which lies just off the Musselshell. Our wagons are heavy-loaded with goods. Got as much to lose as anybody, but we still ain't afraid of Indians."

"The trail you aim to take from here," another had growled, "may be a short-cut from goin' 'way back to the Missouri, but it's steep an' there's lots of danger from rock slides. It may not run into so many Indians, but it'll be a short-cut to hell, anyhow."

"You seem to know a lot," Seldon had scowled, "for men who've never been in this country before."

"We know all about it." The man had grinned. "Fella 'way back down the Mis-

souri drewed us a map an' told us ever'-thing."

Seldon had pointed out the beginning of the trail for them, the one that would save them from turning back to the Missouri. An abrupt turn to the north here would take them over rolling hills and wider valleys. The country would be open for most of the way, and they wanted open country if it came to fighting.

"Craziest thing I ever heard of!" snarled Whittle. "Last thing in the world you'll find in the books of fighting rules. If there is to be any trouble—if, I say—we want cover to fight from."

"And if it's there, Whittle," Seldon's smile was withering, "the redskin will be in it before you reach it, lying there waiting for you. We don't fight by books out here. Indians can't read!"

At best it was going to be dangerous, over steep slopes, through rock-slide country in a dozen places. Seeing some of the stock being brought in, Seldon could only wonder if some of the lean old oxen, mules and horses would be strong enough for many of the long pulls over the high places.

"I go against my better judgment!" Whittle was still white with anger when they were ready to move out. "I wish you and your damned army orders were in hell, *Yellow Bull!*"

"Indians wish the same thing, Whittle." Seldon was ignoring him all he could. "Fill your water barrels on those wagons."

"Water!" Whittle tried to laugh. "Look at the clouds!"

"They've been there most of the night." Seldon glanced up at the sky. "They mean nothing. That late summer sun may drive them away before noon—if we get started before noon."

It was not a nice outfit to handle, especially for a man who had not had a wink of sleep in more than thirty hours, but Seldon could be patient. When he had them stringing out at last, the sun was high in the sky, the thunderheads up there already appearing to thin and space themselves, and the air getting warmer and warmer.

There was an argument over the wagons. He ordered a dozen of the big prairie schooners in the lead. Smaller and weaker outfits were put in the middle. Heavier and stronger wagons brought up the rear. His orders right from the start were to keep the

long line closed up on the grades and on flats, none to get too far ahead of the other.

Despite the good wagons, it was a seedy-looking outfit as it wound its snake-like way out of the valley with a few scouts Seldon had picked going on a mile ahead. Up the first steep slope the line staggered and weaved. Noon was at hand before they were seeing the last wagon rocking over the rim of the first broad mesa.

Seldon was alone, riding a half-mile ahead of Whittle and two of the men who were supposed to open the store on Hanging Woman Creek. Hoofs sounding behind him caused him to turn his head. Ellen Queen was coming up to him, swinging in to his left on a sleek black horse.

"You'd better keep an eye on some of the men in this outfit, Mr. Seldon," she warned him. "I may be wrong, but I don't trust them."

"You mean," he nodded, "the four who're going to open the store?"

"Yes." She was looking ahead. "Sam Brown is the one with the red cast in his beard. Dan Dutton is the one with the gray streaks in his hair. Abel Prince and Matt Seller are the other two. We were far up the Missouri before they joined us. They—" She glanced back over her shoulder. "Here comes Elmer Whittle."

"Just had to fill the water barrels, didn't we!" Whittle swung in on Seldon's right, the big roan under his saddle nervous and constantly rattling his bits. "Those trees ahead, now! Isn't that water?"

"Sometimes it's dry." Seldon's answer was flat. "Snakes and mud."

"There's young Fuller galloping back to us!" Whittle's hand jerked up to point at a slender horseman on a shaggy gray who had suddenly come dashing out of a clump of trees. "Why in the devil is he in such a hurry?"

"Don't know." Seldon's tone was still flat. "Hasn't got here yet."

The thin, freckled youth galloped up. His face was white and he was panting. "It's awful up there!" he gasped. "It ain't a sight for a lady to look at, Miss Queen! There's a long little lake under them trees, water no more'n a foot deep, and a dead man's settin' at each end of it!"

"Calm yourself, Fuller," barked Whittle. "What are you saying?"

"I've said it, Mr. Whittle!" The youth's

bloodless lips were trembling with fear. "They're shot full of Indian arrows, an' the magpies have been at work on 'em!"

DAN DUTTON and Sam Brown came galloping up a minute later. Behind them Abel Prince and Matt Seller were driving their two heavily loaded prairie schooners. Excitement seemed to flash back the length of the train. Guards Seldon had placed on the flanks of it straightened in their saddles; all eyes were fixed on the trees ahead.

Brown turned to Seldon, his eyes snapping. "Dead men, huh!" he said. "I didn't like this trail at the start—an' you know I didn't!"

"Nor I!" agreed the gray-streaked Dan Dutton. "Sorter lost my temper, but if Miss Queen will excuse me I'll say the same thing I said in camp. We're on a short-cut to hell!"

Phil Seldon merely glanced at the girl, and kept his mouth shut. . . .

He needed only one glance at the body of each man when they came to the long and narrow pool. "I know them both," he said. "Charley Rider and Johnny Yarnell. Scouts for General Crook and General Terry, and they did some work for George Custer. I've ridden many times with them, and through some mighty tough country. Good men. Fine scouts."

"Was, you mean," corrected Dan Dutton. "They ain't now! Hell, I never saw men with so many arrows in 'em!"

"Reminders of a strong man's warning." Seldon's face was grim, his words apparently for himself. "And wherever they turn their pale faces, let them look upon their dead left by the mighty Cheyenne hand!"

"What are you talking about?" Whittle stared at him. "We didn't know that Yellow Bull was a poet."

"I merely quoted a little of Long Lance." Seldon turned and looked at the two mountain humps to westward, still seven or eight miles away. "It's long past the middle of the afternoon now." He glanced up at the sun. "We might as well camp here and bury the dead. At dawn in the morning we'll be ready to roll."

He turned and looked at them. "Charley and Johnny were not killed here. Long Lance got them somewhere else, possibly miles away. He had the bodies brought

here after his spies had learned the route your train was taking. They don't particularly like this trail to fight on. Country's too high and open as I said, and yet it is not without its certain spots where they can hit us. I'll try to point those places out as we come to them. I think we'll get through. Right now," he glanced around at the ground, "we'll need some men to dig the grave."

"You're a cold-blooded man, Seldon!" Whittle was staring at him, white lips trembling as he spoke. "You say these men were your friends, but your face and your manner is as hard as a pineknott!"

"We are used to death on the frontier, Mr. Whittle." Seldon's expression was a cross between a grimace and a smile. "Not that we become immune to it. We merely expect it, and learn not to wail. Tomorrow, the next day or the next, we might have to bury you."

"Why—why, that's a fact, Mr. Whittle!" The white-faced Fuller youth was suddenly staring at him. "Queer as it may seem, I dreamed only two nights ago of seein' one of them Indian arrows split you through an' through, an' then an Indian jumped outa the bushes with a tomahawk in each hand—"

"Shut up!" Whittle snapped.

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" Fuller lifted his hands. "Gosh, I didn't mean to let it come flyin' out like that! What Mr. Yellow Bull said just seemed to kinda spurt it outa me. That dream was so plain—"

But Elmer Whittle was waiting to hear no more of it. Even big Dutton smiled behind his hand as he watched him wheel away, heading back toward the oncoming wagons.

A MOMENT later Seldon was riding in the same direction, but he halted when he came to Ellen Queen. Finding her standing beside her horse, he dropped to the ground. In less than two minutes he had told her all he knew.

"Then," she nodded, cold-faced, "there will be Indians ahead?"

"They're all around us now, ma'am." He was letting her have it straight from the shoulder. "Some must have trailed me almost to your camp this morning, and others have watched your train ever since it left the Missouri."

"But we haven't seen the slightest sign of an Indian!"

"They don't let you see them, Miss Queen." He smiled, then turned, looking at a tall peak on a mountain southwest of them. "If they can help it they never let you know they're within miles of you—until they strike. See those three dots above that peak?"

"Why yes," she gasped, staring with big eyes. "They're smoke signals! They look like little dark balloons!"

"Indian talk, the scouts call it," he nodded. "Most of us can read them when it comes to ordinary times, but not when they're on the war-path. They change all signals then."

He could have told her more, but horsemen were coming up, the first wagons of the train right behind them. Everybody was excited and talking. Seldon got back in the saddle, trying to manage the wagons while men hurried on ahead to get the bodies of the two scouts out of the way.

There would be little danger of an attack here. The moon would shine until midnight. The sky was already clear of every blob of cloud. With the mesa as level as a table for more than a mile around the trees, no sizable attacking force could get within fifteen hundred yards of the camp without being seen.

But one had to teach these people something. Seldon had the train worked into a tight V at the south end of the water, and he picked all guards as if the train were in the middle of hostile country where an attack could be expected hourly.

"Never let an Indian know you think he won't come," he told them. "That's the time when he comes."

Finding the dead scouts had sobered most of the people. A lanky Kansas parson preached sermons beside the graves. By the time it was over the supper fires were burning. Knowing Elmer Whittle would not want him, Seldon had arranged to take his meals with young Seth Fuller and his father and mother beside a big old Conestoga. Later, with the yellow horse staked on the grass to graze nearby, he sprawled himself down with a saddle blanket over him. At dawn he awoke with Ellen Queen standing beside him.

"The Yellow Bull sleeps lightly," she smiled. "You must have heard my lightest

footstep from eight or ten yards away."

"Instinctively knew it was not an enemy, maybe." He sat up and grinned, always cheerful at the crack of dawn. "I heard nothing else all during the night."

"And there was nothing." She looked back at the wagons. "I'm sorry you quit taking your meals with us, but it was perhaps better after all—considering my step-father."

"Why do you hate him so much, Miss Queen?" He looked up steadily, watching her face.

"He married my mother for my father's money." The corners of her mouth grew tight. "He treats her like a slave, with rarely a kind word to her. The man just can't be nice to people. You were quick to notice it yesterday morning when you rode up to our wagons. This morning—"

"Ellen!" rasped a voice a few yards behind her. "What in the name of hell are you trying to do, throw yourself at that cheap army scout!"

"Whittle, did anybody ever whip you before breakfast?" Seldon was on his feet. In a few steps he was in front of the captain of the train. "Ever try drinking coffee with your teeth knocked out?"

"Don't—don't talk to me like that!" Whittle was suddenly backing away. "I asked you once to leave this train! I—uh!" He had come to a sudden stop, back against a tall wagon wheel. "Keep away from me, Seldon! Help!"

"You won't need help, Mr. Whittle." A long arm had shot out. A hand closed on Whittle's collar, lifting him and flattening him back against the wheel. Seldon's voice was almost a whisper, eyes looking a poisonous green as they stared straight into Whittle's white face. "Don't bark at me like a dog, Whittle. I don't like it."

They stood there another long minute. Seldon's face was close to Whittle's, noses no more than an inch apart. Whittle's face was like chalk, lips bloodless, mouth flapped open, eyes staring; a cringing, shaking coward unable to utter a sound. Suddenly Seldon turned him loose, put his back to him, and walked back to the girl. With a little squeak of sound Whittle bucked himself away from the wheel. Like a drunk he reeled toward his wagons. A second later a wild outburst of laughter lifted.

"Doggone my hide!" Young Seth Ful-

ler's voice was like a wail in the laughter. "Looks just like he did in that dream I had!"

CHAPTER

3

On to the Fight!

A quick, cutting tongue had lost friends for Elmer Whittle all his life, but he had never tried to control himself unless a prize of some kind hung in front of him. He had been careful in his courtship of Anna Queen. Until he had married her three years ago, he had made it a point to weigh every word, watching himself every moment when in her company. A shy woman—and wealthy up to a tune of between eighty and ninety thousand dollars—she had never once given him grounds to suddenly turn on her like a snarling wild animal.

And back in the Ohio Valley he had avoided contact with the tall and pretty Ellen Queen while courting her widowed mother. Money in the bank, half interest in a small packing house, a town house and a full thousand acres of rich farm lands had been at stake, and the girl's father had left it all in her mother's name. In Whittle's largest wagon twenty thousand dollars in gold yet remained, along with a small fortune in other worldly goods. The rest of it was gone; the account closed in the bank behind them, all property sold. Somewhere on the Musselshell, Elmer Whittle had a dream of opening a great trading post and making himself rich in the new country, and all of it to be in his own name.

But he was afraid of Ellen Queen, and now that that damnable Yellow Bull Phil Seldon had come among them many things could happen. Right from the start he had hated Seldon. There was something too infernally cocksure about him. Ellen had seemed to care entirely too little about men before that swaggering two-gun and hard-steel fighting man had stepped down from his saddle. Wild and daring was written all over him, a devil and—perhaps—a gentleman rolled into one. Either Ellen Queen was playing him for something or she had fallen heels over head for him. Whittle was inclined to believe it was the latter. In either case she could use Seldon, further driving the wedge between Anna and the man she had married.

Anna Whittle cried too much lately. It was always inside the large wagon and late at night when everybody near them was supposed to be sound asleep, but Ellen knew without her mother telling her. Anna was sick of her bargain. Only four nights ago she had sobbingly whispered something about betraying the trust of her former husband and being a traitor to her own daughter. Poor, damned, dumb, soft Anna! At times Whittle caught himself prickled by a feeling of pity for her. With Ellen taking turns with her, she drove the big wagon, and was far better at the jerk-line than Hank Turner, the long-necked Missourian hired to drive the second wagon.

With Ellen beside the high seat on her horse, Anna was doing as well as any man in the train right now. It was the middle of the third afternoon since Phil Seldon had joined them, and they were on the most dangerous slope Seldon had yet found for them. Cattle, mules and horses were stumbling, every animal fighting for footing as they struggled up and up. An angry red dust hung above the train. People and animals had all they could do to breathe in it.

Under a burning sun now, every man, woman and child riding or walking was wearing a wet mask of sweat. Anna's leading wagon was still six hundreds yards from the top, cattle weaving in their yokes, a steer bawling here and there behind her.

Phil Seldon would be a damned good man if he made this slope! Hating him as he had never hated another man, Elmer Whittle had to give him that much credit. They were coming up the toe of a tall, sharp-backed ridge lying between mountain walls a mile and a half away at either hand. Seldon had insisted on coming up to the crest of this high, hot, barren and waterless hell instead of a lower route that lay at either side of it. Only a few had dared to argue long with him when he had pointed out the dangerous rock slides poised on each of the mountain slopes. Years seemed to have passed since there had been a single slide. Men had tried to point that out, and Seldon had scowled them down, the damnable Ellen taking sides with him and helping scold the others in line.

He watched Anna's wagon weave to the top, cattle reeling, eyes walling, every ox ready to drop in his yoke. Once over the

hump of the rim they were on rock-floored ground so level and smooth it might have been a paved highway running straight west.

Anna's wagon passed. Whittle was prancing his horse on the north side of the trail and shouting orders like a slave driver, telling the woman and girl to keep the wagon going when there was no hint of an intended stop here.

For the next three-quarters of an hour after that it was wagon after wagon, rocking, rumbling, straining up, up, and over the rim. Whittle yelled and howled to each driver, going into one wildly waving fit after another. He had never worked harder in his life. Perspiration poured off him and his face was red as a beet.

Seldon had gone on ahead on the other side of the train. When the last wagon had reached level ground, he lifted his hat as a signal for a halt to give the stock a chance to rest and catch wind. Whittle came galloping forward past the panting oxen, the blowing, sweat-streaming horses and mules. His temper exploded when he saw Ellen Queen beside the scout.

"Well, you did it, Yellow Bull!" he cried. "Stock will never be worth their salt after this! Strained every gut in them! Racked the wagons half to pieces! Why in hell couldn't you have followed one of the lower places! Don't see any rocks falling, do you!"

"Not yet, Whittle." Seldon was too tired at the moment to lose his temper. "No reason for the Indians to make them slide with us high up here and out of the way."

Ellen gave a gasp. "Look!" she cried, pointing. "On those tall mountain rims up there!"

Elmer Whittle turned in his saddle, looking northward. His mouth flew open; his face turned white, then yellow, then back to ghastly white again. High on the rim a mile and a half away, sitting like ghost horsemen in the sky, was rider after rider, still and merciless figures, the wind stirring the feathers in their straight black hair.

"No!" The word was like a panther's startled gasp. He wheeled in his saddle. "On the south rim, too! Must be thousands!"

"Six hundred, maybe." Seldon's voice was tired. "More than I thought. Long Lance calling, Mr. Whittle. Wants us to

know he hasn't forgotten us. Had we come up the sides of the ridge, he would have us buried under thousands of tons of rocks by this time."

FROM here on we drink the devil's blood." Phil Seldon's tone was like ice. "Let every man, woman and child know it, Whittle. If half this crowd has fighting guts, then we'll go through. Be weak from here on, and you'll be weak only to die."

"Look at 'em, look at 'em!" Whittle was still staring at the south rim. The scene up there was almost the same as the one now behind him. A long line of horse-men were looking down, well beyond the range of the most powerful buffalo rifle. "When will they jump us, Seldon?"

"I can't read their minds from here, Whittle." Seldon glanced back at the rims. "We can hold them off here. They know it, but it won't be long before they can get at us."

"Maybe we'd better turn back to the Missouri!"

"Too late, Whittle." Seldon's smile was thin. "You had your chance. You wouldn't take it. This crowd with you wouldn't have taken it. Most didn't even want to come up here on top of the ridge."

"But—but why do they want to fight us, Seldon! Damn it all, we haven't done anything to any infernal Indians!"

"Others have, Whittle. There's two sides to it. You're here to take their lands, and the government will back you. Promise an Indian a little strip of territory. He'll go there and try to live, but the whites won't let him stay there. The white men have gone into the Black Hills. They found gold, and they started murdering the Sioux on his own dab of ground. Now the Northern Pacific Railroad is pushing through the Indian country, and whites are killing reds—"

He cut himself short. Whittle had wheeled away from him, riding back along the wagons, talking excitedly with the people on the high seats. Ellen Queen spoke her thoughts.

"Elmer Whittle never listens to anything unless it's the sound of his own voice. But look!" She was staring at the rims again. "They're gone!"

"Just wanted to jangle our nerves." Seldon had glanced up, and saw that the rims

were now as bare of horsemen as the palm of his hand. "We'll see them again. Don't ever think we won't."

They were moving on a few minutes later. The way was level, and the train was now rolling with little effort. Ahead of them the crest of the ridge was widening. By six o'clock trees and grass were showing on top of a slight rise a thousand yards wide.

Tenseness was in the air when they pitched camp. Once more Seldon set the wagons in a tight V at the east end of a narrow little lake. Tonight he doubled his guards. The deep grass was enough in itself to hold the stock in close to the wagons. These people had seen Indians now, and they listened when Seldon talked to them.

At daylight the last breakfast fire had been washed out and the train was ready to roll when a fierce shout of alarm turned every pair of eyes to westward. A rider had suddenly popped into view on a blood-streaked white horse. The man hung low over his saddle horn, both hands gripping it, the fringe on his buck-skinned arms fluttering. His hat was gone, empty holsters flapping at either side of him. In the horse's left flank, swaying and bobbing, was the feathered shaft of a long arrow, the wicked head of it buried deep in his body.

The horse fell a dozen yards from the first wagon, at the end of his dying run. A bulky, red-bearded man was hurled from the bloody saddle. As he hit the ground and rolled over, the broken shaft of an arrow flapped like a wing against his side. When Seldon leaped forward and dropped beside him, he saw that the arrow had gone all the way through the body, the iron head of it sticking out the chest.

"Hello, Phil." Looking up, drawing on the last of his strength, the dying man forced a bloody grin. "Glad—to see you. Big freighter outfit—dozen miles ahead. Knew you—were coming this way. Help them, Phil. They can't—last long."

Seldon straightened up in a very few moments. The man was dead. Seldon's face was grim as he looked at the pop-eyed crowd. "Ebb McPherson," he said. "Another one of General George Custer's scouts. I guess the most of you heard what he said. Must be pretty bad ahead."

"I heard, yes!" cried the white-faced Whittle. "The best thing we can do is to

turn around and head for the Missouri." "You people have just seen this man die." Seldon was speaking to the crowd, ignoring Whittle. "There's a fight going on ahead right now. It must be pretty tough. We'll put Ebb's body on one of the wagons. By pushing right on we should be coming into that fight in two hours."

"To hell with that!" cut in Whittle with a snarl. "The Lord helps those who help themselves! You said it was fairly safe here! I'm still the captain of this train! Damn you, Phil Seldon, I'll see you—"

Elmer Whittle never finished it. Phil Seldon made one quick step forward. Both hands shot up, the left feinting, the right fist shooting straight to the point of the bearded chin. In a running fall, Elmer Whittle went backward as if kicked by a mule, and landed heels over head in the little lake.

"Bless your soul, Phil Seldon!" cried a big, raw-boned Missourian. "Get ready to roll, folks!" He wheeled on the crowd. "If our Elmer don't want a fight, then let 'im lie there an' drown!"

"Roll, roll!" yelled another voice. "On to the fight!"

CHAPTER**4**

The Devil's Blood

Dripping, slopping and cursing in hissing gasps, Elmer Whittle came up out of the water. For a moment he was like a head-lowered bull setting himself to charge. Hank Turner, his driver, was holding Whittle's hat. The rest of the crowd seemed to have completely forgotten him.

"I wouldn't now," warned the driver. "Ain't the time for it. They're all like het-up wildcats, an' somebody else is apt to start clawin'."

"Anna!" Whittle yelled at his wife. "Keep our wagons out of that damnable line! We're not going on with these fools just to die!"

The woman was on the high seat, but she was not looking at him. He grabbed his hat from Turner.

"I ain't all fool, Mr. Whittle," the driver said. "Stayin' here by ourselves is dyin' here. I ain't fur it, *no!*" He turned his back and walked away.

Wagons were beginning to roll. The Brown and Dutton wagons were first. Sel-

don was on the yellow horse, motioning. Ellen Queen was on her horse, standing squarely in front of her mother's cattle. When the first two wagons passed, Anna Whittle lifted her long jerkline and let it come down with a *whack*. Ellen Queen moved her horse, and the oxen swung past her. Right behind Anna's wagon trailed Hank Turner. The entire train began to go forward like a great, mottled snake uncoiling. Struck by the sudden thought that he might even be asked to stay behind, Elmer Whittle moved quickly to his horse waiting under a nearby limb.

With men to the right and left, scouts ahead and three sharp-eyed riders behind as a rear guard, it was a train set to fight at the drop of a hat. A woman or a girl drove almost every wagon. The children were ready to jump behind them and take shelter in case of sudden attack from any direction. Fighting was Phil Seldon's business. The wagons were showing it. This was the result of his quiet talks among the men since he had been with the train, getting them ready, preparing them for anything.

But Elmer Whittle had decided that Seldon had to die. No decent, self-respecting man could let him live. Not after this! Never in all his life had Elmer Whittle suffered such humiliation. Every eye was on him. Laughter was hard-held everywhere; even the children looked as if they were ready to burst right out with it as wagon after wagon rolled by. Little it would matter now if Indians did kill a lot of these yokels—and Ellen Queen along with them. That would get her out of the way.

He kept away from his own wagons. With the sun spreading its hot rays down on him, his clothing started drying. Seldon had hit a clean blow, leaving only a small lump on the chin, and the beard hid it. Another man might have smashed his mouth and nose. Physically he was as good as ever. His two revolvers were still in his waistband, each a five-shot and deadly at close range. A gentleman did not burden himself with weapons as long as forearms. On his saddle, just in case he needed it, was a small but powerful carbine. In a general fight a man could drop a bullet where he wanted it, and no one would know about it.

Through the dust, the train kept moving right along, the wagons closed up in tight formation. In places the slopes were gentle enough so that the cattle could trot in their slow, lumbering manner. After an hour, the country ahead looked as if it were dropping off into deep canyons and wide valleys. The mountain ranges north and south were widening, coming to an end in the distance in two gigantic humps. Indians were up there. From each of those humps puff after puff of smoke signals rose, dark little blobs of smoke floating lazily away in the still, clear air.

Seldon was getting ready for a battle. He had picked a dozen strong young men and had them flocked around him. The wagons were now closed up in five long, almost perfectly straight lines. Ahead, more and more puffs of smoke dotted the sky, as if frantic hands were sending them up. Dust boiled ahead of the wagons, and in the distance there was a faint thundering sound, like gunfire.

Then Seldon was galloping his horse forward, heading for what looked like the rim of a drop-off a thousand yards away beyond low trees. His picked men pounded after him on either side, and a few minutes later there came the sound of shots.

It was an awesome pageant when one came close to the rim. Cutting down between fantastic walls of rock to a valley floor a mile below, was a wide and steeply sloping trough. Reaching the rim of this drop, Seldon and his men had used crowbars from the wagons to start a great boulder rolling down the trough. At once the boulder had started a landslide, getting other stones rolling and tossing, while the men with him opened fire with their rifles. Below them they were routing out more than forty Indians, who had been waiting silently in the rocks and brush to ambush the train. Now, with rocks crashing down on them and bullets flying, the redskins were leaping to their feet and trying to flee. Many of them dropped, caught by bouncing rocks, cut down by rifle fire.

Seldon divided his small force and pushed his advantage. Six men followed him afoot up the strange formation of rock on the north side of the trough. Six were on the other side. The way on each side was so narrow it was like going over the rims of wagon wheels, and a few guns were

able to clear everything within a few bloody minutes.

Yells lifted in answer to a signal Seldon had passed back. The middle line of wag-

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ons lurched forward, going over the rim and down the trough, losing itself in the dust. Line after line followed, gunfire ringing and crashing ahead and at either side. Everybody seemed to be fighting or doing something. Only Elmer Whittle was out of it, sitting his horse and staring—a man not knowing what to do. When the three rear guards of the train came up, he followed them down, cursing the dust, his horse slipping and sliding.

It was smoking, raging war going on down on the great flat below the trough. The whites had taken advantage of the dust, coming down under its thick cover while it filled the trough, with Seldon and his little gangs giving them a protecting rain of fire from above. Now Seldon and his men were over and down, back in their saddles; and the wagons were jamming forward in five tight lines again, making a compact fighting wad with their guards swarming in a great circle around it. This was going through in spite of hell!

ELMER WHITTLE stopped. For a few moments he imagined himself behind all this, directing it, driving it, leading swirl after swirl of those fighting men circling the wagons. Faster and smaller circles of Indians were wheeling in and out against the larger one of palefaces, around the jammed mass that was wagons moving on and on, with dust and gunsmoke rising. Yells and screams came from those smaller circles, pinned down by the spinning rim of men and horses.

A mile ahead of the fighting train, smoke and flames lifted where twenty wagons stood in a tight circle on the high bank of a little creek. Five of those wagons were afire; flames danced and leaped in the wreckage of what had once been hard-oak bows and long canvas tops. Grimy and smoke-blackened, buck-skinned and bearded bullwhackers were on their bellies, shooting back from under and between the wagons.

It was the big freighter outfit. In another hour it would have been the end of it. Clouds of Indians were still around it, the bodies of their dead sprawled on the slopes of the rise. Other bodies lay for more than eight hundred yards around the rise, dead ponies and horses mingled with men.

Somewhere back of all this was the

dreaded old Long Lance that Seldon had mentioned so many times—wise, all-knowing; keeping himself high in the hills; probably watching the battle from some distant peak. Right at this moment he would have sections of his vast gang striking in other directions, hitting some unprepared village, settlement or wagon train.

Phil Seldon was going through here. The half-flying circle of whites spinning around the train was ever-widening. Here and there blasts of gunfire came from the wagons themselves. Women and mere boys and girls were no longer to be held from suddenly grabbing rifles and trying to be of some help. As the train fought closer to the rise, a fierce cheering and singing started lifting.

Elmer Whittle had become a man in a daze, seeing it all, watching it with staring eyes, so amazed he was no longer thinking of himself. A wicked *sur-rup* and a flash of something skimming the top of his broad saddle horn snatched him back to life with a wail of terror. A jerk of his head to his left showed death closing in on him from eighty yards away—a low-lying, coppery-red figure on a tall pony. The Indian was closing in on him, a strong arm again bending a bow. Whittle yelled, lunging his horse forward. Instantly he stiffened as an arrow from behind him drove its sharp head deep under his shoulder blade.

Now it was the ride of a madman who never once thought of snatching his small revolvers from his waistband and trying to fight. Another arrow struck him. Pain jerked him forward and low over his saddle horn, saving him from still another arrow that passed just behind the back of his head, splitting his hat brim.

At that moment, an old woman gone crazy and screaming like a maniac in his saddle, Elmer Whittle saw five horsemen cut themselves out of the circle of running whites and head toward him. One of them had his big hat hanging to his saddle horn. Mounted on a tall yellow horse, his long hair flying and bannered in the wind, he sped toward Whittle. Two words wailed from Whittle's lips:

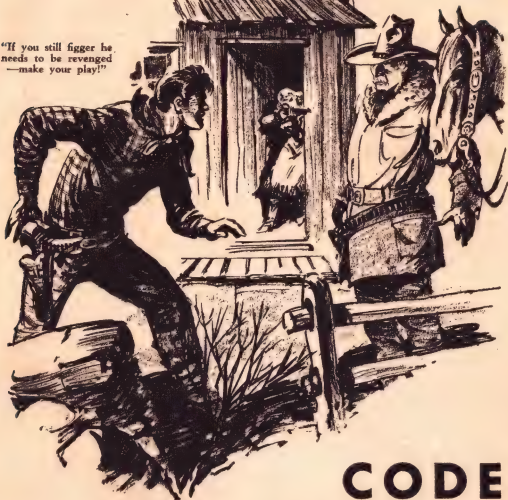
"Yellow Bull!"

Elmer Whittle remembered little of that wild dash that saved him. Blood was pour-

(Please continue on page 112)

By **HARRISON COLT**

"If you still figger he
needs to be revenged
—make your play!"



CODE OF THE HUNTED

Matt was too much in love to risk making Laura his widow—and too much a man to run away from the death that dogged his every step.

MATT RAINEY thought that the day was hotter than it had any right to be, even for August. There was not the faintest breath of air stirring, and he could feel the searing strength of the sun's blazing heat through the thickness of his heavy flannel shirt. The shade of the wagon shed no longer reached out to where he and the cook

labored over the chuck wagon, getting it ready for the fall roundup.

"Someone's comin', boss." Pringle, the cook, shaded his eyes with a hairy, stubby-fingered hand and squinted off into the glaring distance to the south.

Matt straightened slowly and painfully from his cramped position beside the wagon and wiped the perspiration from his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. The horseman was just coming over the last of the low ridges beyond the ranch house.

Matt saw with a faint stir of surprise that it was Red Donegan. Red had started for town only a few hours before and, knowing his partner's habits, Matt had not expected him back before sundown or later. He wondered if some kind of a catastrophe had hit the Silver Palace and the other saloons in town.

Red rode toward the two men, sitting his saddle with a lingering trace of the square-shouldered, straight-spined look that clung to an ex-cavalryman long after he was mustered out of the service.

"What happened?" called Matt, winking at Pringle. "They run out of beer in town?"

But there was no answering grin on Donegan's face. He reined the sorrel to an abrupt halt a few yards from the chuck wagon and slid effortlessly to the ground. He stood there a moment, an odd tightness about the set of his jaw.

Matt eyed him expectantly. "Well? Did you see Hannay about that bob-wire we ordered? And what about the pair of new hands you were going to take on for the roundup? Have any luck?"

Donegan ignored the questions. He said, "Matt, I'm afraid I got some bad news."

"Bad news?" Rainey did not seem too concerned. He was a solidly built man not quite thirty, with dark hair and a pleasant, quiet-smiling mouth. "You mean Hannay ain't got that wire in yet? Well, I reckon another couple of weeks' wait won't kill us. At least—"

"Matt, listen to me!" The redhead's voice was sharp, almost angry. "You remember that bartender back at the Hourglass saloon in Newton?"

Matt Rainey felt the cheerfulness spill out of him like water from a punctured goatskin. A queer tingling sensation played along his spine. "Sure," he said quietly. "Clark, his name was. What about him?"

"He's here in town. Saw him at the Silver Palace. He was askin' Kirsten for a job."

That brought the whole thing back again. The hushed room, with the bartender, Clark, down on his knees beside the sprawled, dreadfully still body of Bill Harrick. He remembered how the bartender's bald head had gleamed like polished ivory in the direct glare of the kerosene lamp suspended from the ceiling. Clark lifted his gaze from the dead face of his employer and stared across the room at the smoking sixgun in Matt's hand. His eyes were angry.

Matt—whose name was then Rance Matthews—and Red had drifted into the saloon a couple of hours earlier, trail-boss and segundo of a newly arrived trail herd. Between them they'd had about six or seven hundred dollars. But their luck had been unexpectedly good in the no-limit poker game going on at one of the tables. It was when Matt laid down three Kings and a pair of treys to beat Bill Harrick and his straight, that the trouble started. That had been the biggest pot of the evening, and Harrick's face turned a dead white at the prospect of losing it. He'd come quickly to his feet, ugly words spilling from his mouth. Matt saw his hand go inside his coat and come out with the short-barreled derringer. He'd drawn almost by instinct and fired hastily as the other man's ball creased his shoulder.

A little later, the sheriff came. He listened to Matt and Red Donegan and the dozen or more men who had witnessed the affair from the start. "All right, Matthews," he said. "I reckon you did the only thing you could do. Everybody seems to agree Harrick made the first move. That leaves you in the clear as far as the law is concerned. But my advice to you is to line out of here as fast as your horse will take you. And don't stop ridin' till you get some place where they ain't even heard about Clay Harrick!"

"You don't figger Clay will listen to the truth about how his brother died?"

The sheriff shook his head from side to side impatiently. "Clay won't care how his brother was killed. It'll be enough for him that his brother *was* killed. Mister, I know Clay Harrick! Take my advice—travel out of here!"

THE sheriff's advice seemed good. Three weeks later the two men rode into a pleasant valley far to the north where the bluestem grew higher than a man's stirrup. With the stake the poker game had provided, they took over the run-down buildings but excellent water-holes of the old 23 Ranch, stocking it with as many white-faces as their funds would allow.

Now, two years later, the results of their hard work were everywhere in evidence. Barns and ranch buildings had been repaired and painted, new sheds and corrals had been built, and miles of pasture land had been fenced in.

All this flashed through Matt's mind in a matter of seconds. He found himself asking, "Kirsten give him the job?"

Red shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't hang around long enough to find out."

"Then likely as not, there's nothing to worry about. He may be out of town in a few days and no harm done."

Red shoved his battered white Stetson further back onto his unruly tangle of flame-colored hair. His pale blue eyes regarded Matt impatiently. "I wouldn't count on that," he warned. "If Kirsten won't hire him, one of the other saloon-owners in town sure will."

Matt stood silently for a brief period. The day's heat seemed to have abated suddenly. He fancied he felt a chill breeze touching his spine, stirring against the back of his sweat-soaked shirt. For some time now, the thought of Bill Harrick and his brother, Clay, had been pushed back into a corner of his mind from which it had emerged only at rare intervals. He had begun to consider it something he was finished with, once and for all. But now, suddenly, it struck him that it would never be settled one way or the other as long as Clay Harrick and himself both remained alive.

"Two years is a long time," he said slowly. "Besides, I was wearing a mustache then. Maybe he won't recognize me."

Red Donegan gave his head a disgusted shake. "Yeah," he drawled scornfully. "And maybe it won't snow next winter. Matt, you're talkin' damn foolishness! Why, even if he didn't recognize you—even if you never went into town—he'd probably find out the truth. He saw me there in the saloon. Chances are he recog-

nized me. And if he did, he's bound to ask questions. When he finds out I have a partner named Matt Rainey, answerin' the discription of a gent he knew as Rance Matthews, well—"

The red-headed man shrugged significantly and fell silent.

Finally Matt said, "I ran away from Clay Harrick once. But then I didn't have any very good reason for not running. This time it's different."

"I know how you feel about the ranch," Donegan began. "Just the same—"

"I wasn't thinking about the ranch."

The other man's brows lifted. "Oh. You mean Laura Prentiss?" His voice held a queer sharpness. "I didn't know that you and her—"

"I haven't actually asked her to marry me, if that's what you mean. But I reckon she knows I'm leading up to it, and so far she hasn't tried to discourage me."

"Seems to me you ain't in a very good position to offer any girl marriage! Not unless she craves to be a widow afore she's had a chance to lay her weddin' dress away!" Red's face had twisted into an angry scowl. "But, of course, if you don't care about her feelin's, ain't no reason I should!"

Donegan turned abruptly and led his sorrel toward the nearby corral. He walked with quick, jerky steps and the set of his shoulders betrayed his anger. Matt watched him for a moment, then thoughtfully turned back to the chuck wagon.

AFTER supper, Matt saddled up and rode in the direction of town. Before the Prentiss house at its outskirts, he swung down and tied his horse to the white picket fence surrounding the garden. Laura was sitting on the top step of the porch. She jumped up and came toward him, smiling. She was a tall, willowy girl with deep chestnut hair framing a rounded and lovely face and a determined chin.

"I'm glad you could come this evening, Matt," she called. "Dad had to go back to the newspaper office and I'm all alone."

"Merchants giving him so much business he can't handle it all in the daytime?" Matt asked.

A quick soberness ran over the girl's face. "I wish that was the trouble. But the shoe seems to be on the other foot. Most of

the merchants are refusing to run any ads in the paper since Dad decided to fight Sheriff McCann's re-election. I suspect they're afraid to."

He gave her a puzzled glance. "You mean McCann has threatened them?"

"Not only that. He's threatened Dad that he'll put him out of business if he keeps printing items unfavorable to him. That's why Dad is down at the office now. Someone warned him that an attempt might be made this evening to break in and damage the press. He decided to take the precaution of staying there throughout the evening. . . ."

Matt walked with the girl back to the porch steps. She said, "Sit down, Matt. I'll make a pitcher of cold lemonade and bring out some cookies."

But he caught her hand before she could start to go inside. "Wait a minute, Laura. I—I got something to tell you."

She looked at him, faintly puzzled by the grimness in his face. "Yes, Matt?"

"Laura, I suppose this will come as something of a surprise," he said hesitantly. "But the reason I came here tonight was to say good-by."

"Good-by?" The girl's lovely blue eyes went wide. "You're going away?"

"That's right, Laura. I'm leaving the valley."

"Not—not for good?"

"I'm afraid so. I don't think it's very likely I'll ever drift back this way again."

It was some time before the girl spoke. "I see," she said in a numbed voice. "I think I'm beginning to understand."

Her words brought a frown to the man's face. He swung around, almost angrily, and caught her by the shoulders. "No. Dammit, Laura, you *don't* understand! You think this is easy for me? Leaving the one person in the world that—that I care most about? You think I'd do it if I didn't have to? If I had any choice?"

Laura's startled glance sought his face. "What are you saying, Matt? That you love me? Oh, darling, then—then why—?"

He explained about Clay Harrick. After he had finished, she stared for a moment in dismay. "But that was all such a long time ago, Matt. Surely, by this time—"

"I'm afraid you don't know the kind of a man Harrick is. Even if he was on his death-bed, he'd likely try to get up and

come for me if he found out where I was."

She was silent for a moment. "Matt, we could go away together. To some place where he could never find us!"

Soberly Matt shook his head. "I thought this valley was a place where I'd be safe. It wasn't. It would be the same anywhere else. No matter where we went we'd be living under the shadow of his hate. Besides, what about your Dad? You willing to leave him now? With this fight on his hands?"

A shadow darkened the girl's wide-set cobalt eyes. After a moment or two, she made a hopeless little gesture with her hands. "You're right, Matt. I couldn't go away now, when Dad needs me."

There seemed to be nothing further to say. The girl followed Matt as far as the gate and stood watching as he untied the reins and prepared to swing up into the saddle. But at the last moment she gave a little cry and flung herself into his arms. Her lips felt soft and warm against his own. Then she was gone, darting away up the path toward the house. . . .

The sudden, swift-descending dusk had begun to soften the harsh, angular outlines of the false-fronted buildings farther up the street. Lamps already were gleaming in some windows, their first feeble glow becoming brighter and more golden by the moment.

Matt hoisted himself into the saddle. He had proceeded fifty yards down the street when there came the crash of shattering glass, followed almost instantly by a loud and angry shouting to his rear. He pulled up abruptly and flung a hasty, startled glance back across his shoulder.

What he saw caused him to wheel his horse swiftly and spur at a gallop up the street. Men swarmed from saloons and stores in an eager horde, converging upon the frame building that housed the town's only newspaper. As Matt halted his gelding at the edge of the hastily assembled mob, he could see the jagged hole where a stone had crashed through the large window at the front of the *Beacon's* office.

On the walk before the building, a thin, silvery-haired man—Laura's father—stood very erect, gazing coolly into the angry faces of three men lined up in the street before him. One of the men was shouting violently at the top of his voice, evidently

working himself into a rage. He was a large, beefy, thick-bellied man with a brick-red complexion and wicked, darting little eyes. Matt recognized him as Boggs Trimble, a rancher from the north end of the valley. The pair of lean, gun-hung young men with him were his sons.

Prentiss was listening patiently to the angry rantings of the man confronting him. There was no hint of fear in the editor's face. He did not even seem angry, although the destruction of the window and the vile insults on the fat rancher's tongue could hardly have left him indifferent.

TRIMBLE'S voice bellowed on. "Damn lies!" he accused hoarsely. "Everything you wrote about me was a damn lie! An' I got no intention of standin' fer it, you hear? After this, I aim to be sure you don't print any more! Stand aside, mister! I'm goin' to have a look at what you got set up fer tomorrow's paper!"

He started for the door of the office, but Prentiss moved swiftly to bar his way. He said flatly, "I'm sorry, Trimble, but I can't permit that. You'll have to wait until tomorrow like everybody else to find out what's in this week's issue. However, I assure you your worries are groundless. There is no mention whatsoever of you or your activities in this paper. You have my word on that."

"Your word!" Trimble's voice mouthed a stream of oaths. "What kind of a damn fool you think I am? Now step aside if you don't want to get hurt!"

The street had grown very quiet. Someone was beating out a lively dance tune on a tinny-sounding piano in one of the saloons at the opposite end of the street, and the sound came faintly to the ears of the men crowding the street. A dog barked uneasily in some distant backyard.

Prentiss did not move. The ruddy color of Trimble's face deepened, and he let his plump-fingered right hand fall suddenly on the butt of the gun holstered at his side. That was the signal for Matt to jump down quickly and elbow forward through the crowd.

He addressed Prentiss. "What's the trouble, sir? These gents canceling their subscriptions to the *Beacon*?"

Trimble spun around, his eyes narrowing. "Stay out of this, Rainey. This is

an argument strictly between me an' Prentiss here."

Matt said drily, "Maybe it was. It ain't no longer. I'm cutting myself in for a stack of blues."

He was aware that men were ducking hastily away to either side of the street in case shooting started. The stout, red-faced man studied Matt with a worried calculation in his eyes. His glance moved carefully down to the walnut-handled gun that Matt wore in a holster tied to his right thigh. He evidently didn't like what he saw.

"We won't forgit this, Rainey," he blustered, and started to turn away. "Come on, boys."

But rage gleamed wildly in the eyes of one of the young men. He made a sudden quick move to draw. Next moment, as a gunshot echoed between the false-fronted structures along the street, he cried out in pain and grabbed his arm just above the elbow. For a moment he stared slack-jawed at the wet, sticky redness oozing between the fingers of his left hand. Then he raised his eyes slowly to the smoking gun in Matt's hand. Astonishment stood plainly on his face.

In the next few minutes, the Trimbles disappeared and the throng of men in the street found their way back inside the saloons and stores from which they had emerged. Matt and the editor stepped into the *Beacon* office.

Prentiss surveyed the broken front window ruefully. "Got to get some boards and nail up the front, I reckon." Then his face brightened. "At least this evening is likely to be considerable of a disappointment to Sheriff McCann."

"McCann?"

"Yes. I'm positive he put Trimble up to this. It shows the man is clever. He's aware that if a gang of unknown hoodlums were to break into the *Beacon*'s plant and do enough harm to keep the paper from going to press for the next three, four weeks, many people might jump to the conclusion that he was responsible. But Trimble and the *Beacon* are old enemies. They've been on opposite sides of nearly every controversy that's broken out in the valley in these past five years. That feud has assumed something of a personal matter between Trimble and myself. So, if the damage

were to occur at Trimble's hands, McCann would be in the clear."

Matt frowned. "Then it seems likely that Trimble and his sons aren't finished. They'll try again to make trouble for you."

Prentiss chuckled softly, his eyes cheerful. "Not after what happened. The one thing the Trimbles respect is a man faster than themselves with a gun. No, I don't think we need to worry about that—not as long as you remain in the valley."

Matt gave a little start. He shot a quick glance across the room. Then his face tightened as he seemed to arrive at a sudden decision. He said, "I reckon that'll be for a while yet."

Night had settled opaquely over the town when Matt stepped out into the street a few moments later. In the dim smear of yellowish light spilling through the door of the saloon across the street, he saw his horse waiting patiently beside the hitchrail. He had started forward toward the animal when a voice from the shadows halted him in his tracks.

"Howdy, Matthews. Remember me?"

The man advanced into the faint illumination and Matt caught sight of his face. "Hello, Clark," he said. "What do you want?"

The bartender removed his hat, wiped the bald and faintly shiny top of his head with a handkerchief. Then he replaced his hat and said, "I'd like to talk with you a minute. . . ."

EARLY next forenoon Laura Prentiss rode out from town. She perched uneasily atop the seat of her side saddle and stared down into Matt's face. Her deep cobalt eyes were anxious. "Dad said you told him you were staying on in the valley. Is that true?"

Matt had hurried out of the barn as he'd seen the girl ride into the ranch yard a minute earlier. Now he said, "Your Dad's right, Laura. I'm staying."

"But what about Clay Harrick?"

Matt was aware that Red Donegan had come across the yard and halted nearby. His pale blue eyes were sharp and hard with curiosity as his gaze shifted from his partner to the girl and back again.

Matt drew a long breath. "Maybe I won't have to worry about him after all."

"Huh?" broke in Red's startled voice.

"What in the hell do you mean by that?"

Matt explained. "I spoke with Clark last night. He said he had no intention of sending for Clay Harrick. He told me he'd had the notion I was the one who had drawn first in that gun-fight with Bill Harrick. But after seeing that bit of gun play in the street last evening, he was willing to concede he was wrong and that I'd pulled hardware a shade faster than Clay's brother."

"Matt, you're a damn fool!" exclaimed Donegan shrilly. "Can't you see what he's up to? He wants to keep you here until Harrick arrives. You ain't goin' to let him trick you, are you?"

The girl glanced quickly at the redhead, then returned her disturbed gaze to Matt's face. "Maybe Red is right. Maybe it's just a scheme to keep you here."

Matt said, "If it is, I reckon I'll find out soon enough."

Red groaned and shook his head despairingly. "Yeah. After you've stopped some of Clay Harrick's lead! Is that what you mean?"

A little later the girl rode back toward town. For the rest of that day, Red Donegan maintained a sullen silence, evidently offended by Matt's failure to heed his advice.

In the weeks that followed, Matt saw little of the girl. There was the fall beef roundup and the drive to the railroad. Matt had plenty of time to think, as he lay on his bedroll near the chuck wagon at night, or moved steadily beside the plodding herd by day. What if Red was proved wrong and Clay Harrick never showed up? What was there to stand in the way of his marrying Laura Prentiss then?

But a chill, unpleasant truth worked its way into his mind. What about Laura? Was he being fair to her? How could he be sure that some other man who had known him as Rance Matthews would not turn up? Men were always drifting up from the south, then returning back down the trail to the centers of the cattle trade in Kansas. A casual word dropped in idle conversation could find its way to the ears of Harrick or one of his friends. Clark or no Clark, Clay Harrick might one day be starting up the trail to the north. . . .

After his return from the trail drive, Matt purposely stayed away from the girl.

Once in a while he saw her at gatherings or dances, frequently in the company of Red Donegan. His partner did not say much, but Matt sensed that Donegan was more than a little fond of the girl, himself.

One day some three weeks after the election that had retired Sheriff McCann to private life, Matt rode out to take a look at the wolf traps and poisoned baits he'd set out along the upper section of Pebble Creek the week before. The wind had taken on a raw, wintry bite that penetrated even his sheepskin-lined jacket, and he was shivering from cold when he came in sight of the old line shack on the lower creek. The sight cheered him, and the thought of hot coffee cheered him even more. He dismounted and led his horse around to the lean-to shelter in back.

Leaving his Winchester in a corner of the cabin, he quickly had a fire going in the stove and water boiling in the ancient coffee-pot. From his saddlebags, he took cold bacon sandwiches that Pringle had prepared and placed them on the rough-boarded table.

Halfway through his meal, Matt put down his steaming tin of coffee and paused to listen. Then he got swiftly to his feet and moved to the door, his hand dropping to the butt of his holstered gun. What he had heard was the sound of a horse splashing through the creek, then approaching the cabin at a gallop. He opened the door narrowly to study the rider emerging from the timber along the creek, coming from the direction of the 23 Ranch headquarters.

Next moment recognition stirred in his eyes and his taut muscles seemed to relax. He shoved the door wide and stepped through it.

"Laura! What are you doing way out here?"

A flicker of relief crossed the girl's face at the sight of him. She brought the bay to a halt ten feet from where he stood.

"Thank goodness, I found you!" she said quickly. "Pringle said you'd ridden this way. When I saw the smoke from the cabin, I was praying that it would be you."

Bundled up in a thick buffalo-hide coat that must have belonged to her father at one time, she was wearing a pair of brand new levis and riding her horse like a man. Her face looked blue and pinched from the cold. Matt thought he had never seen her

look quite so strange, and yet something about the very look of her sent a quickening stir through his veins.

Matt moved toward her. "You look cold," he said. "I'll take your horse around in back. You duck inside the cabin out of this wind and get warmed up."

"No! Matt, listen to me. You've got to ride out of here right now! There's not a moment to lose. He may be heading this way this very minute."

Matt stared. "Who you talking about?" "Clay Harrick. I'm positive it's him! He rode in late last evening and I saw him talking with Clark outside of the Silver Palace. Then, when the stable-keeper told Dad that he'd been asking the way out to the 23 Ranch, I suddenly realized who he was! I've been looking for you for the past couple of hours all up and down the creek."

Matt said, "If you had all this trouble finding me, maybe Harrick will, too. Anyhow, let's get inside the cabin. We can talk in there. And you need some hot coffee."

Despite the girl's protests, he led her horse away, then joined her a few minutes later inside the cabin. "Laura," he said. "I've got something to tell you. It's about Clay Harrick. I've decided—"

He broke off, listening. The cabin grew very quiet. Laura Prentiss stared at him, and the pale, pinched look came back into her face. But this time it wasn't the cold.

Matt got up and went to the door. He stood there watching the gaunt, lanky rider come through the timber and swing up toward the cabin. He turned to the girl. "Stay here in the cabin. No matter what happens, stay in here! You understand?"

Then he went quickly through the door, pulled it shut after him and moved out to face the man swinging down from his horse a short distance from the cabin.

CLAY HARRICK swung around quickly, his almost colorless gray eyes swift and alert in their appraisal of the man advancing toward him. He was tall, well over six feet, and he had a sandy-colored mustache that hung raggedly across the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. His features were lean and bony, set in a bleak, expressionless look that masked the man's wild, quick-flaring temper.

"Howdy, mister," said Matt. "Looking for somebody?"

"Yeah." Harrick's voice was curt, unfriendly. "You Matt Rainey?"

"I am."

A sharp glint of hatred came into the eyes of the tall man. "My brother was killed by a tricky, 'double-dealin' gent named Rance Matthews in Newton a couple of years back. Funny how exactly you fit his description."

Matt said, "I'm not denying that I'm Rance Matthews, or that I was the one who killed your brother."

Clay Harrick seemed to stiffen in surprise. He stared at Matt suspiciously. "So you admit it?"

"I admit that when your brother drew on me, I pulled my gun and fired in a hurry. I didn't have much choice. If I had hesitated, they would have planted me in boot-hill instead of him."

"You're lyin'!" Harrick's voice was a snarl. "You say my brother drew first? If that was so, you wouldn't be standin' there now! I know how fast he was with that derringer of his!"

"A man who uses a shoulder holster ought to be careful about the lining in his coat."

"What in hell you talkin' about?"

"There was a rip in the lining of your brother's coat. I noticed it afterwards. It probably kept him from getting his derringer out as fast as he intended, and it made him shoot a little wild when he did fire. I'm not sure I would have had a chance if it hadn't been for that."

Clay Harrick was frowning. "You'n him were in a poker game. There must have been some reason for him goin' for his gun. Bill never could stand to be cheated at poker."

Matt said drily, "He couldn't stand having his straight beaten by a full house either."

"You tryin' to say that wasn't a marked deck?"

"If it was, me and my partner had nothing to do with it. We were playing in your brother's place. His bartender furnished us a fresh, new deck just before that last hand."

A surge of ruddy color darkened Clay Harrick's cheeks. "Dammit! You tryin' to say my brother was a card cheat?"

Matt said quickly, "If you want to know

the reason your brother went for his gun, I'll tell you. It was because he had the same kind of uncontrollable temper you have! He'd been having bad luck all evening, but he was certain he had the cards to take that final big pot. When he discovered otherwise, he lost his head and obeyed a wild, crazy impulse that shot through his brain. . . . Now, if you still figger he needs to be revenged, make your play!"

Clay Harrick stood very still, a kind of shocked recognition flickering in his eyes. It was as though he were remembering things from the past, incidents that bore out the truth of what Matt had said. For several endless seconds he did not move.

Then, without a word, he turned his back on Matt and swung back up into the saddle. Matt watched him ride off, numbed by the suddenness of the whole thing.

Laura was standing beside the door, Matt's Winchester in her hands, when he entered the cabin. As she stepped back and his startled gaze fell upon the weapon, she said with a queer, determined harshness, "I would have used it too, Matt, if he had—"

"I believe you would have!" he said in amazement.

She leaned the rifle against the table and suddenly all the strength seemed to go out of her. "Oh, Matt!" She threw herself into his arms.

But a while later she pushed away from him and frowned up into his face. "Red must have been right about Clark sending word to him."

Matt shook his head. "Clark had nothing to do with it."

Laura's eyes widened. "You mean—" She paused uncertainly, as though unwilling to go on. "I think Red Donegan is in love with me. You don't suppose—?"

"—that it was Red?" He shook his head, smiling. "No, it wasn't Red. I was the one who got word to Clay."

"You!"

"It was the only thing I could do, Laura. A man can never beat trouble by running away. He has to stay and face it. I knew I could never marry you as long as the shadow of Clay Harrick hung over us. And if I couldn't have you, I figgered I'd just as soon be dead."

"Matt," said the girl softly. "Oh, Matt. . . ."

**They might have been pards, these two—except that
Tim McGovern lived only to collect his stolen
birthright . . . in Joe Capa's blood!**

A dark shape came out of
the night. . . .



LEGACY OF HATE

**By WILLIAM
VANCE**



TIM MCGOVERN, tall and raw-boned with a reddish face and high cheek bones, and looking every one of his thirty-odd years, stepped from the train in Wells, Nevada. He watched the red-haired girl pick her way through the ankle-deep dust to the board walk that ran the length of the dusty, drab town. A dark,

wide-shouldered young man came from the Antlers Hotel. He took both the girl's hands in his own and his lips brushed her forehead.

McGovern had ridden the smoky, dirty train with the girl from Salt Lake. She'd looked at him with interest and they'd exchanged a few words. McGovern felt a twinge of envy as he looked at the man again. He thought, "Just maybe, when all this is over, I could beat his time." He thought it with some amusement because the dark man was handsome and carefree. And he had the air of a man of some substance. McGovern pulled his eyes away from the couple.

Impatiently, McGovern surveyed the dusty stretch of street between the depot and Antlers. His frosty blue eyes lighted momentarily as they lifted to the purplish outline of the Rubies in the distance. He had a feeling that he was home.

The coach beside him began moving and ahead the bell clanged. He pulled the saddle he'd bought in Salt Lake from the moving platform and swung it up on his shoulder. Wells was the same and yet it was different from when he'd seen it last, ten years before. But then, he thought morosely, perhaps the change was in himself. He took long steps through the dust of the street and stamped his boots on the wooden walk in front of the Antlers. Through the dusty window two men ceased their talk and swung their heads to watch him. He didn't know either of them. The man and red-haired girl were moving on down the street and her hand rested on his arm.

McGovern dropped his saddle on the board walk and went into the hotel and on through the lobby, without pausing, and into the dining room. He didn't recognize the waitress either, and he pushed by her and opened the door that led into the kitchen.

The cook, a white-haired, red-faced man, was thrusting sticks of wood into the stove. Sweat streamed from his face as he worked. He looked up and hurriedly clattered the stove lid into place and came toward McGovern, a wide smile showing his toothless gums.

"Tim!" His voice was wheezy with asthma. "Tim McGovern, my sainted aunt!" He grabbed McGovern's hand and pumped it while his eyes went up and

down McGovern, taking in the campaign hat with its upthrust brim, the faded blue coat with darker cloth where the sergeant's stripes had been removed. The coat and hat were all that remained of his uniform. "We all thought you was dead, Tim! Where you been, boy? What you been doin'?" How'd you know I was here?"

McGovern's grin was lop-sided. "One at a time, Easter," he told Easter Sunday, a man he liked. "A brakeman on the W. P. told me you was cooking at the Antlers. I've been down in Cuba with a man named Roosevelt. Just got out. And I couldn't be killed and I won't die—until I've seen him."

Sunday's face clouded as he shook his head slowly. "Beats all how time does fly. I'd purt' near forgot."

McGovern's jaw ridged. "I haven't."

"He's not like the old man, Tim," Easter Sunday said earnestly. "He ain't one bit like Mike. He's human, Joe is, just plain human. Everybody likes him."

McGovern said, "I'd like to buy a horse."

"Not only that," Easter continued, ignoring McGovern's hostile stare. "He's had a bad run last year and this, too. No water, Tim, and the grass ain't good. Bad times is on us. An' he's hit worst of all."

"About that horse, Easter," McGovern said insistently.

"But here's something else, Tim boy," Easter went on hurriedly. "He's 'bout ready to get married. Th' gal is Nan Freeman. You don't know her, Tim, she come here after you left. Her paw bought the old Rockin' A and then he up and died and she—"

"If everything's so good, Easter," McGovern said in a gentle voice that sent chills down Sunday's neck, "why are you cooking here? Why aren't you at the Circle C, where you belong?"

"I left before the kid took over," said Sunday unhappily. "An' I never went back. Didn't like ranch life any more, no-how. I just as soon be here in town."

"Who's an honest horse trader, Easter?" was all McGovern said.

Easter Sunday sighed. "Tolliver's 'bout the best in town. He won't skin you if he thinks you're wise t' him. His livery is behind the hotel."

At the door McGovern stopped and turned. "Who's left on the crew?" he

wanted to know. "Any of the old gang?"

Easter shook his white head sadly. "Spade Cole an' that's all."

THE Circle C was much as he remembered it. Coming through the gate on Snow Water Lake road, he reined in the claybank he'd bought from Tolliver and leaned toward the weathered gate post. Just a foot over his head he saw the initials, TM, just as weathered as the cracked log that formed the framework of the arch. He'd been thirteen then, on the first horse he owned. He'd stood in the saddle to carve his initials there.

Nostalgia seized him; his lips tightened as he thought about the things that had happened to the Courtneys, the uncle and aunt who had raised him. Mike Capa was the man who had ruined the lives of his only living relatives. Mike Capa, the slick foreman who had betrayed his trust. And now the Circle C belonged to Joe Capa, Mike's son, and no doubt as black-hearted as his father. McGovern beat on his saddle horn with a clenched fist and pulled the claybank away and put him up the dusty road.

He took a grim satisfaction from the gaunted castle that grazed futilely at the bone-dry range. He hoped the drought held until every last beef belonging to the Circle C dropped. He urged the claybank on at a faster clip.

Over the rise the ranch appeared, a rambling stone structure among a grove of cottonwood. Framed against the Rubies and the dark green of the lower slopes, it was a sight that brought a deeper ache to his heart. Smoke spiraled from the kitchen lean-to, and far off to his right a big dust cloud boiled up, drifting high into the dry, warm sky.

He skirted the big house, not looking at it. He stopped by the corral and watched the dust cloud grow into a herd of horses. A rider pulled out and circled, heading the cavy into the open corral. McGovern watched as they hazed the last of the animals in. A short man dismounted and walked stiffly toward McGovern. The other riders looked curiously and then headed back toward the open range. The short man stopped and stared, and then Spade Cole whooped and clumped forward to pump McGovern's hand.

"Tim!" he cried and his one good eye gleamed joyously. "Ain't changed a dad-burned bit," Cole chuckled. "Just like the day you left, kid!"

Still a kid to him, McGovern thought, smiling. "Might look the same," he said. "But I'm not. I'm looking for a job."

Spade Cole sighed gustily and with relief. "Thought for a minnit . . . It's bad here, Tim," he abruptly changed his first words. "We're gettin' ready to pool everything in the valley and drive up into Idaho. Maybe you can get on the trail crew."

McGovern stepped closer. "Capa—he'll be goin'?"

Spade Cole squinted his one good eye and slowly wiped the back of his hand across his tobacco-stained chin. "He will, all right. Listen, Tim boy, I know what you're thinkin' an' it ain't good. You better just climb on that claybank and keep goin', boy."

McGovern said shortly, "Jumping to conclusions, Spade?"

Spade Cole heaved a wheezy sigh. "Reckon not, Tim." He blew his nose with a series of honks into a red bandanna. "Maybe I just remember how things went. But this boy—why he was just a kid when his ma took him away from this here wild and savage country. That's what she said, anyway. I didn't lay eyes on him till he was a growed man. But he's a good 'un, Tim, nothin' like Mike."

"That's what Easter told me," McGovern said with a short laugh. "Man, I'm looking for a riding job. And I'd as soon you didn't mention you knew me before."

Spade caught up his reins and stepped stiffly into his saddle. McGovern saw that age was catching up with him. Spade caught his eye and nodded toward the valley.

"Boss is comin'—if you want to brace him for a job." He wheeled his mount and then pulled up sharply and swung around in his saddle. "Tim, you been like a son to me, but I'm warnin' you—don't try nothin' with Joe. He's mighty pop'lar 'round here."

"You got a lot of business to tend to now, Spade," McGovern said irritably.

"That I have," Spade Cole answered, "and Joe Capa is part o' it." He moved away, walking his mount.

McGovern turned his back on Cole and

watched the buggy coming up the valley. He looked at the big rambling stone house. He had avoided it purposely until this moment.

He saw the small window of the room he had lived in the first fifteen years of his life. He remembered lying there in his bed on cold wintry nights, the quilts heavy on him and frost covering the window pane. Listening to the steps of Aunt Minnie in the kitchen below. Snug under his covers, hearing the howl of a coyote on a distant ridge and shivering deliciously at the lonesomeness of it. The thud of hooves on frozen ground and the deep, easy curses of the cowboys getting ready for the day's work. The deep booming laughter of his Uncle Pete coming from the kitchen, along with clank and clatter of pots and pans and the smell of coffee and frying bacon. He remembered these things with a deep ache, and turned to watch the approaching buggy, dust winding up from the wheels and drifting high overhead in the hot windless air.

He loosened his gun and moved the clay-bank toward the house and he closed his mind to thoughts of his boyhood. His heart thumped against his ribs and he waited impatiently for the buggy to come up to him.

IN THE buggy were two people. The man was the darkish man he'd seen in Wells and the red-haired girl sat beside him. She nodded and smiled at McGovern. He liked the openness of her smile. He liked the easy grace of her head and her poise. He'd noted that on the train and now he quickly noticed it again. He lifted his hat and turned his attention to the quick-moving, lithe man beside her.

The man turned to him with an easy, friendly grin. "Howdy, stranger. Light and rest your saddle."

"You're Mr. Capa?" McGovern's face felt tight and he wondered if his eyes communicated his thoughts.

"That's me, Joe Capa." He leaped lightly to the ground and held out his hand to the girl.

She shook her head. "I'm going home, Joe," she said. Her eyes went back to McGovern, curious, questioning and almost challenging.

"Better stop for a bite to eat," suggested Capa. "I won't be here. Got to get on out

and see how the boys are coming." Over his shoulder he told McGovern, "We're getting ready for a big drive. No water or feed around here."

"That's what I hear," said McGovern. He knew he should hate this man and he knew he would in time. But now he saw only his open, smiling face and his genial air. *Just like Mike*, he thought bitterly. *Smooth, slick and likable, with no hint of the blackness underneath.* "I thought maybe I could pick up a riding job with you." He'd have to put their quarrel off and wait for the right time.

Capa grinned wryly. "Guess you can—if you'll wait for your pay like the rest of the boys. It'll be three, four months anyway."

"Can't spend money up there," observed McGovern.

"Then you're on," Capa said. He stepped back from the buggy as Nan Freeman picked up the lines and spoke to the team. "See you tonight?"

She shook her head, smiling. "I've things to do, Joe. I'm making the drive, too."

Capa's face clouded. "Sure I can't talk you out of that?"

She laughed and her gray-green eyes were alight. "You sure can't," she said. "After all, there'll be Rocking A stock in the herd."

"You could send a rep," Capa said and then shrugged. "We've covered that ground before. Don't know why I keep harping on the subject."

McGovern and Capa watched the buggy move down the valley. Capa heaved an audible sigh and McGovern thought: *Now's the time. Now's the time to tell him and watch the look on his face. I'm Pete Courtney's kid, Capa. Pete, the man I knew as a father, who was a father to me all the years of my life. The man Mike ruined. Your father and my father, and now you and me—except now it'll be different. Because I'm not gentle and trusting like Pete. I don't turn the other cheek like Pete and I won't be fooled by your smooth, slick ways like Pete was fooled by your old man. So fill your hand, Capa, for one of us is going to die!*

He looked up suddenly to find Capa staring at him. Their eyes met for a moment and McGovern relaxed, cursing mentally. Why didn't he go ahead? His palm

was wet and his hand ached and he realized he'd been tense as a bowstring.

Capa said, "For a moment I thought I knew you . . . But say, I asked if you'd had dinner yet?"

McGovern wheeled the claybank. "Sure, I'll pick me a bunk and get rid of my gear."

"Don't do that," called Capa. "We're rounding up. We'll go right out and from there we're starting the drive."

"I'll wait for you at the corral," said McGovern. He wanted to get away from Capa. He felt the influence of the man too strongly. He had to give himself a chance to build up his hatred the way it had been since he'd got the news down in Cuba that Pete and Minnie were dead. Pete by his own hand and Minnie a few days later, of a broken heart.

"Saddle that blaze-faced sorrel for me," Capa called after him.

THE restless, incessantly moving herd grew day by day, and each day the problem of holding them became greater. They were half-starved and half-wild. This made a combination that drew every ounce of energy and skill from every man engaged in the roundup. Tempers grew ragged and short. Through it all, Capa moved with patience and dogged determination, working as hard as any man from any of the outfits making the drive.

The weather, already hot and sultry, grew worse. Up over the Rubies big gray and white thunderheads built up and dissipated and reformed with the morning sun. At night the lightning would crackle among the rugged peaks, but not a breath of fresh air stirred and the promise of rain was a mockery.

In this atmosphere Easter Sunday arrived to take a job as trail cook. The old man conferred briefly with Spade Cole. McGovern watched them with a cynical grin as they talked low-voiced at the chuck wagon, casting covert glances his way at frequent intervals. While they both watched him, they didn't give him away.

On the day before the drive began, Nan Freeman appeared at the roundup camp. She was there that night when the dog-tired crew came in. And later across the campfire, McGovern watched her and Joe Capa with a strange feeling inside of him. A feeling he couldn't fathom. He looked up

to find Spade Cole eying him, and then the old cowman moved around the fire and squatted beside him.

"Look at 'em," he said, low-voiced. "Look at 'em, kid: You wouldn't want t' bust that up, now would'ja?"

A bolt of lightning exploded among the jagged peaks almost over them. A rumble of thunder beat like giant drums and rolled across the valley. A drop of rain the size of a small rock hit the back of McGovern's hand.

McGovern said, "Looks like rain."

"Nope," disagreed Spade. "Just like some people I know—lots o' talk an' nothin' behind."

The lightning continued to play among the peaks. And the thunder was louder. A new rumble was added to that of the thunder—the thunder and rumble of a thousand hooves.

Someone yelled: "Stampede!"

McGovern was on his feet, running toward the cavvy. He pulled his rig from the ground as he passed and ducked under the rope holding the cavvy and saddled the first mount he laid hands on. He put the animal over the rope and headed out into the night with the wild wind blasting at him and the vivid lightning flashes alternately lighting his way and blinding him.

He came in on the leaders of the herd and pressed in against them, flailing away with his slicker. He heard shouts and shots behind him, and he spurred his wildly running mount ahead and cut in on the thundering leaders. A flash of lightning showed him a sea of tossing horns, and as far back as he could see there were the heaving backs of the frightened, hunger-ridden animals.

He felt the horse beneath him stumble and grunt and groan and then fall headlong into the path of the thundering herd. He kicked free of the stirrups as the pony went down and threw out his hands to protect his face. He felt the earth rise and the breath was knocked from his body with the force of his fall. He rolled over and struggled to his knees, realizing dazedly that his horse was still down. In a flash of light, he could see the white bone protecting through the skin of the animal's leg. The thunder of the herd grew louder and the ground beneath him shook as he sagged on his knees, unable to rise and thinking

numbly that there was no way out; that he'd die here under a million sharp hooves and that Joe Capa would never be brought to terms; that red-headed Nan Freeman would become his wife. . . .

He shook his head again and tried to stagger to his feet. And then a wild dark rushing shape came out of the night and a strong hand was pulling him up. A flash of lightning revealed the grim, taut face of Joe Capa. Without stopping, Capa somehow got him into the saddle. Trembling with fear and excitement, the overburdened horse plunged out of the path of the blind-running herd. In a lightning flash McGovern saw the herd end. The stampede was running out.

Back at the camp, Capa jumped down and McGovern slid to the ground.

Capa asked, "You okay?"

McGovern nodded. He owed this man a debt now and he wished horribly that he didn't. He tried to tell himself that Capa would have done as much for anyone or that anyone would have done the same thing. It didn't help. He said, "Thanks," in a dry voice.

Capa mounted and said, "Long as we got 'em on the move, might as well keep 'em going. You stay here with Spade and a few of the boys. Pick up the strays in the morning and catch up with us as soon as you can. You're in charge." With these staccato instructions Capa wheeled his mount and chopped off into the night.

Easter Sunday and Nan Freeman came from the chuck wagon and stood by the fire.

"See what I mean, boy?" Easter said around his gums. "That Joe is—"

"For cripe's sake, shut up!" snapped McGovern.

He caught up the claybank and rode bareback out through the sage until he came to the horse that had fallen with him. He slid to the ground and in the lightning flashes tried to remove his saddle. He gave up in disgust, because the saddle was cut to pieces anyway. He rode back to the trail camp. Easter had turned in, but Easter's own hull lay on the ground beside the campfire.

Nan Freeman huddled before the fire with a blanket around her slim shoulders. She said, "Easter said for you to use his saddle."

He said, "Thanks," gruffly and got a tin cup from the chuck wagon and poured a cup of black coffee from the pot. He felt a surge of anger at how things had turned out. He acknowledged to himself that he owed Capa a debt. Until that debt was paid, he was powerless to act.

He looked at the girl and found her eyes on him. He felt strangely uncomfortable. What was it he was thinking of, when the herd bore down on him and he thought his time had come? He wrinkled his brow, trying to recall his exact emotions at the time. But he couldn't remember.

She said, "What is it, Tim?"

He knew what she meant, but he said, "What d' you mean?"

She dropped the blanket from her shoulders and stood up. He explored her face in the light of the campfire. Her red hair was in disarray and it caught the light of the fire and her gray-green eyes were on him. He thought soberly that she was beautiful.

"I remember you on the train," she said gravely. "You reminded me of a man going some place."

"Just out of Roosevelt's outfit," he said by way of explanation. "I've lived around here. Long time ago."

Still unsmiling, she said, "But on the train I—I tried to imagine what you had been, where you were going and why you were going there. It all added up to violence. It was in your face and in your eyes. And now you're here—"

He stood up. "We'll get an early start."

Her hand went to her smooth red hair with an angry gesture. "If you wish," she said. She rose gracefully and faced him. "And Easter Sunday coming to work—though when he quit he swore he'd never return. And Spade Cole watching you all the time! I wish I knew!"

THEY caught up with the main herd before Capa reached the Idaho line. They were in better grass and the cattle were more easily managed. The big herd moved on, traveling steadily and requiring little attention at night because the grass grew thicker the farther they traveled.

The cattle piled up into a new barbed wire fence just over the Idaho line and the point riders cut the wire. When Capa reached the fence he raced ahead, motioning Mc-

Govern to follow. The point men were unabashed at Capa's rage.

"Hell, Joe, we got to get through," said one of them.

"Maybe take us a month longer to drive around that fence," said the other.

Capa's temper subsided as quickly as it appeared. "We may have trouble on account of that." He wheeled his mount. "Guess we'll have to patch it up after the herd gets through," he told McGovern.

That night after the herd was bedded down and the crew squatted around the fire, Capa brought out his guitar.

"Belonged to Mike," he said, as he ran his fingers over the strings. Nan sat beside him, her hand on his arm.

Across the fire, McGovern felt his eyes grow hot and his hands tightened. Spade Cole and Easter Sunday moved up beside him. He looked at them distastefully and stood up.

"Guess I'll have a ride," he said.

"Ride?" Spade Cole snorted. "You been ridin' all day."

McGovern saw Easter nudge Cole. He stomped off into the night and saddled his horse. He felt someone at his elbow and turned. It was Nan Freeman.

She said, "I'll ride with you."

"Just as soon you didn't," he said shortly.

He saw her stiffen and she raised her eyes to look him in the face. "Don't hurt yourself this way, Tim," she said. "Why can't you confide in me?"

He swung up in his saddle and picked up his reins. "Good night," he said.

This Joe Capa had the Indian sign on him, he thought, as he loped easily down a draw with a well-defined wagon road. And now the girl. He tried to get her out of his thoughts and idly speculated on this wagon road he traveled. Probably the road to the homestead over which they were passing. Joe's attitude toward cutting the wire on a nester's outfit had made him see the man in a new light. Try as he would he couldn't dredge up the old hatred he'd felt before he met Capa. It made him angry.

Out of the draw, he could see the winking yellow lights of a town in the distance, and he set his mount toward them, cutting away from the road and going direct. In another smaller depression, he ran on a cavalry troop, getting ready to bivouac.

He repressed an urge to go down there, because it'd not been too long since he was in an outfit. He pulled his horse around in a wide circle, avoiding the bivouac area. A short time later, he tied his horse at a hitching rack and went into a rough board shack labelled *saloon*. The rough flooring did not hold sawdust, and the half dozen men who lounged at the bar and sat at tables along the wall seemed to fill the place to overflowing. McGovern went across the room and asked the bartender for whiskey. He poured a drink and lifted it when a voice reached him.

"Drinking alone, Tim?"

He turned and eyed the cavalry sergeant standing beside him. "Dan Brinker!" They shook hands briefly. "Thought I saw a troop bivouaced down the way. Yours?"

Brinker nodded. These two men had seen action together in Cuba and each held that certain feeling for the other common to men who have fought together.

"How does the outfit you got on feel?" asked Brinker after they had disposed of a drink each.

McGovern grinned. "Good," he said. "I'm on a trail crew that's driving a herd through here."

Brinker nodded. "We heard about it today. Homesteaders raising hell because their fence was cut." He shrugged his brawny shoulders. "Nothing we can do. We're up here chasing a few Nez Perce who broke out of a reservation and have been raising all kinds of bill-be-damn."

Brinker picked up the whiskey bottle and two glasses with one hand and motioned toward an empty table against the wall. They had another drink sitting down. Brinker leaned with his back against the rough board wall. "Kind o' surprised," he said, "running into you this way."

McGovern built a cigarette and lighted it, watching Brinker carefully. The man had been a good non-com and knew his business. "Why?" he wanted to know.

"Always figured you for a man who wouldn't last too long." Brinker's voice was casual. "All them medals you got was for just bein' a damn fool."

McGovern laughed without humor. "There's a story there," he said, "Maybe I can tell you about it—sometime."

Brinker shrugged his thick shoulders. "Figgered so. But you ain't found what

you're lookin' for—I can tell that. You still got that look in your eyes."

McGovern felt uncomfortable and wanted to go. He reached for the bottle and poured their glasses full. "Got a long day ahead o' me tomorrow," he said and tried to keep the impatience he felt out of his voice.

"Don't be in such a rush," said Brinker. "Maybe I can help you out of a jam."

McGovern's instant reaction was that Brinker knew of his intention to kill Joe Capa. He relaxed when he realized that Brinker had no way of knowing.

"Well?" he asked.

Brinker drained his glass. "We had a few bad guys in our outfit. You know that as well as I. You'll remember one—Tom Rebatto from right around here. Maybe he was one of the wild bunch from over in Brown's Hole country. He and a gang are laying for your herd. Guess they'll probably get you tomorrow night."

McGovern's face did not betray his sudden interest. This was the way out, he thought. Let Rebatto take the herd. Then without a plugged nickel to his name, Capa could find out for himself what trouble was like. When Capa was stripped down to nothing but the gun on his hip, McGovern would tell him the story he'd waited too long to tell.

He followed Brinker's eyes and saw the cavalryman looking at his hands, which were clenching and unclenching on the glass. McGovern shoved the glass from him and stood up, a tight grin on his face.

"Thanks a lot, Dan," he murmured. "Thanks." He turned and walked across the room and out the door. He climbed in his saddle and headed back toward the camp, his thoughts chaotic. He remembered Rebatto, a dark, brutal man with a killer complex. If Rebatto jumped the herd, Nan's cattle would go; as would the herd of every single rancher who joined the drive. To hell with all of them, he thought savagely.

A FLICKERING yellow light to his left caught his eye. He stopped because it moved in a strange manner. The light bobbed up and down, made a zig-zag course and then stopped. McGovern pushed the claybank around a clump of cedar and over a knoll and stopped. From where he sat

his horse, he could hear voices and could see figures of men around the light, which was a lantern. He slid down from the horse and anchored rein around a clump of sage. He went down the slope, making his way slowly and keeping as quiet as possible.

Near the light now, he dropped to his knees and removed his spurs and shoved them inside his shirt. He crawled along on his hands and knees with his gun in his hand. He stopped behind a clump of sage ten feet from where Joe Capa sat astride his horse with a rope around his neck. Capa's hands were tied to his saddle horn. The rope around his neck went to a limb on the tree under which the strange group was gathered.

The three men on the ground, McGovern pegged at once as homesteaders. They wore overalls, rough denim shirts and shoes instead of boots. All the three of them carried short-barreled carbines, and their expressions were ugly.

"You fellows are making a big mistake." Capa's voice was calm. McGovern had a moment's admiration for his iron nerve.

"I say b'damn, let's hang him," one of them spoke as McGovern settled himself closer to the ground. The man was rough and uncouth, middle-aged, with a sweeping mustache and unshaven jowls.

"Then what're we waitin' for?" The man who asked the question spat a huge wad of tobacco that landed in the sage beside McGovern.

"But how we gonna let them drivers know we mean business? Ain't no use hangin' him unless it puts the fear o' Gawd in the rest o' them." The man sounded uneasy.

"We'll tie him on his horse after and haze it back to their camp. They'll git the idee." The first man spoke authoritatively.

McGovern stood up. "Don't move, anybody," he said.

The big mustached man swung around, startled, a curse on his lips.

"Let them short guns slip to the ground and do it easy," McGovern warned. "I'm not fooling."

Capa said, "Good boy, Tim!"

"You, with the whiskers—untie him," McGovern said and motioned with his gun.

The big man scowled and stared. He still kept his rifle in the crook of his arm, while the other two men had dropped their guns hastily. He made his move and tilted the rifle. McGovern's gun flamed. The big man clutched his arm and the rifle clattered to the rocky ground. Capa's horse reared and McGovern ran in and jerked the animal down. Two of the nesters dove for the bushes and the man McGovern had wounded sat on the ground, groaning.

McGovern swung up behind Capa and in a moment threw the rope from his neck.

"Thanks," Capa said, rubbing his neck with his fingers. "Guess that was a close one."

McGovern didn't answer but slid to the ground and went over to the wounded man. "Where's your horse?" he asked.

The big man stopped groaning. "You'll pay for this," he growled. "By holy ned you'll play!"

"Shut up," said McGovern. "Get on your horse and ride. You're just nicked. Next time you won't be so lucky!"

When the homesteader was gone, Capa said, "Pretty rough on him, wasn't you?"

McGovern didn't answer. He started off through the sage toward the claybank. Then he halted and swung around.

"We're even now, Capa," he said between his teeth. "I owe you nothing. You owe me nothing! Understand?"

Capa's puzzled voice followed him out

into the darkness. "You never did owe me anything, Tim."

There was little sleep for McGovern that night. In the morning, haggard and worn, he took Capa aside. "Might be a good idea to reroute the herd," he said without preliminaries.

Capa looked him over carefully. "You're a damn funny guy, Tim," he said in that friendly voice of his. He shoved his hat back and squinted impatiently at the sun breaking over the mountains in a blaze of yellow and red. "I don't get it."

McGovern said, "Just a little rumor in town. Might be healthier to change our route."

"Rumors are always rumors," said Capa. "These homesteaders will be behind us now. We can't do too much roundabout traveling or snow'll catch us."

McGovern swung up on his horse. He saw Nan come from her tent and she waved to him. He felt a heaviness in his chest, and then he answered her wave and put the claybank out toward the point.

They had little to fear, he thought, until nightfall. He rode point, in the beginning heat of the day. The wind blew from behind the herd. Dust boiled up around him and he pulled his neckerchief up over his nose and kept his head down. He was in that position when a rattle of gunfire brought him alert. He put spurs to the claybank and raced out of the dust cloud.

She's been around plenty, gents, and she'll still be around when you're gone.
Write your will before you make a play for Azalea, the gal who's—

"Rough, Tough— and Kissable!"

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**STAR
WESTERN**



A FULL dozen horsemen raced out of the adjoining hills, not a hundred feet distant, their guns going. McGovern heard the whistle of a bullet and then he was urging the claybank into the dust cloud.

A masked man swept around the leaders, and McGovern knocked him into the dust with a sweep of his gun. He turned the leaders toward the little valley that opened to his view. A slug whined over his head and he turned to see two men riding low, flailing with their slickers, trying to stampee the herd.

McGovern used his gun then, but the men came on. Behind them he heard yells and shots.

"Over here," he heard Capa's voice above the bawling herd. "Hole up under the chuck wagon."

McGovern fired again as more men appeared behind the two. He felt a burning sensation in his arm. He looked down, seeing the red blood spread out in a dark blotch on his upper arm. He spurred on across the bawling, milling herd and was out the dust. Capa yelled and McGovern kept going, spurring the claybank into the valley into which he'd tried to haze the cattle. The sounds of firing were incessant now. He pushed the claybank across the little valley toward higher ground. Moments later the sturdy animal was heaving up a steep slope. The sounds of firing were faint. He wondered what Nan and Capa would think of his apparent desertion. They were outnumbered two to one.

He stopped the hard-breathing horse and jumped down and scrambled up the slope. He felt something wet and rubbed his hand across his eyes. They came away bloody.

Up on the highest point, he slipped a mirror from his pocket and began flashing it. For minutes he worked before an answering flash came from far out in the hazy, hot distances. He knew the troop was on the move. Brinker would know what to do. He finished in a few moments and slid the mirror back into his pocket. He fell and scrambled down the slope to his still-heaving claybank. He mounted and put the animal recklessly down the steep mountain-side.

His arm throbbed and the red ran slowly down and dripped from the ends of his fingers. His head burned but his arm was

worse. He tried to put a tourniquet above the wound, but it was awkward working with one hand and he gave it up. The trail crew were bottled up around the chuck wagon and the cattle were scattered all over the valley. Just below where he'd entered the valley, circling horsemen fired on Capa's outfit. The circle broke up when McGovern stopped the claybank and unlimbered his saddle gun. Then from the other side of the valley, Brinker's troop poured through with their burgee flying and their bugle sounding.

McGovern sighed wearily and his head slumped forward. He didn't see Nan Freeman as she rode to where he lay. He didn't feel her arms as she lifted his head and cradled it in her lap.

It was much later when he awoke. Easter Sunday was putting the finishing touches on his head wound. Spade Cole stood by, his good eye glittering.

"Dad-burn my hide," he swore, "if that wasn't suthin', kid. Bringing them horse soljers here jes' when you did!"

"Shuddup, you ol' raccoon," growled Easter. "My patient can't get riled with yore fool jibberin'!"

"Suthin' else gonna rile him then," chuckled Spade. "I told Joe Capa all about—"

"You two," snarled McGovern. "Why can't you leave a man to die in peace?"

"He told me too," Nan said softly. "Tim, dear—Joe is all right. He'll try to make it up. He knew the Courtneys had a nephew, but he didn't know your name. He's looked the country over for you, all these years."

"That's the plumb truth, so help me," said Spade Cole. He moved aside and Joe Capa stepped into the circle, smiling.

"Don't mind giving up half the ranch," he said with a half-smile that grew wistful, "but my girl—"

"Shoot, ye've gained a partner," said Spade Cole.

McGovern struggled to an elbow in spite of Nan's protesting hands. "Sure been a fool," he said. "But now—well, maybe everything's for the best. . . ."

Cole, Easter Sunday and Capa turned away, because Nan was leaning close to McGovern and saying something in a very soft voice.

HANG-TOWN WELCOME

It was too late for Pete to confess that he was just a fiddlefoot dentist—he had to produce a railroad . . . or die!

Pete's fingers closed hard over Sim's wrist.



By ALAN HENRY

DOC PETE WENDEL trudged along with a long stride that came of walking the prairie. He moved toward the knoll where the beard-grass ended, and saw the narrow, mud-caked

street of Price City winding between a store and a white-frame cottage.

Crowded Topeka lay far behind, and he was glad of that. Perhaps here in western Kansas that was building up so fast an itinerant dentist could come to rest. He wiped sweat from his still-youthful brow; then swung to his free shoulder the blanket roll that held his chloroform and forceps.

The lonely walking, the wind moaning in his ears, the heat blistering his feet, all were ended. He whistled happily. Now he didn't mind the sale of his bay horse that had not brought enough for railroad fare; nor did it matter that only a single greenback remained in the pocket of his weathered broadcloth pants.

This was new country, and a new day for him. He'd try Price City. If the competing toothache poultice proved too great, he could move on to Walton Springs, five miles beyond. He hoped that would not happen. He was tired of wandering.

Pete paused abruptly atop the knoll, frowned and repeated the name aloud. "Price City." Johnny-Reb General Price had beat through Kansas and been pushed right out again. He hadn't connected the two. But who would name a Kansas town after a reb?

Besides, all that was in the past; almost fifteen years now since the booming cannons made a man hunger for silence, and agony and hatred fixed the eyes on a far horizon. Then, he had been Captain Pete Wendel, Third Ohio.

A sudden wind swirled a dust cloud that hid the deserted street. Pete raised his head high, ready to walk down. He turned as a wood-burning locomotive's tin whistle shrieked distantly. The dust cloud cleared. Pete checked himself again. The street had come alive, as though out of a prairie mirage.

A man at the hitching rail, near the center of the street, gestured excitedly in Pete's direction. Heads poked from doors and out of windows. Horsemen clopped to the rail. The crowd doubled.

He was sure this was a posse assembling. He wanted no trouble; Walton Springs was the place for him. Then he shrugged off that thought. These men could ride him down in a moment's gallop.

His hand brushed the blanket roll, and he parted his dry lips in a brief smile. The

chloroform and forceps, and possibly some heaven-sent toothache, would convince them he was all right. He started toward them, unchallenged.

Slowly, Pete dusted his clothes as if this were journey's end. He glanced from under his battered black Stetson, watching the horsemen dismount. Coming on, he listened hard, trying to gauge the temper of sounds. The rumble of voices fell away, replaced by a long swell of silence. Pete looked up then, and saw only wonderment on their intent faces.

He sensed in the nearest ones that all held in abeyance any decision concerning him. But no one reached for a weapon.

"Evening," he said tentatively. Only an expectant hush greeted him. "A man afoot carries the muck of travel on him," he added quickly. "I've done a mite of walking this day. Come straight out of Topeka—"

"Topeka!" The cry passed through the crowd like some pre-arranged signal.

Pete stepped back a pace, tensing as though he had spoken a forbidden word.

Another gust blew down the street, and with it came a creaking sound behind that lingered after the wind had spent itself. He turned slowly, seeing the large, black-lettered sign swinging at the front of the cottage directly opposite him. But he fixed his gaze on the woman near the doorway.

Her soft brown hair lay neatly piled atop her head. She stood there tall and slender in dark calico. He thought she held herself tense as he, himself, did. And as he faced her she seemed to grow tenser yet, until reluctantly he withdrew his eyes.

A man in patched butternut pants lounged at her side, his head cocked warily, picking his teeth with a cottonwood splinter.

Pete read the sign last: *Mrs. Sally Doan. Boarders.* And he felt something in him akin to disappointment.

THE crowd's shuffling brought him around sharply. He still felt the woman's eyes on him, boring now into his back. A passageway had been cleared and a man, walking straight as a ramrod, stepped toward Pete.

The tails of a black frock-coat swung easily with him as he approached. The butt of a six-shooter peeped just above his nar-

row waist. Fine lines, etching deep-set gray eyes, crinkled as he studied Pete. His voice was soft and mellow, but held friendliness in reserve.

"Afoot?" he asked. "You came afoot? The railroad's night ten miles away."

"Afoot," Pete said.

"Been anywhere else yet?"

"Price City was my first stop. I don't mind saying, though, that seeing you gather from the knoll I figured to move on to Walton Springs."

The man's eyes flashed over the crowd and back at Pete. "This way you save five miles, and since you walked, you know how level the land runs. You'd need no cutoff through the valley to reach Price City."

"Level it is, and it runs straight for Price City," Pete agreed; and his own bewilderment increased.

The man's sun-blackened face wreathed in a quick smile. "I'm Seth Parklin. The mayor." He squared his shoulders, and added: "Formerly, Captain of the Second Texas. Some of my boys followed me here to Kansas hoping to forget and to make a fresh start. Will you be holding that against us?"

Pete didn't stifle the long sigh escaping his lips. He let the blanket roll slide gently to the ground. His eyes went briefly side-long, trying to catch a glimpse of the woman near the doorway. She still stood there, exactly as he had first seen her.

He faced Seth Parklin then, and saluted smartly. "Captain Pete Wendel," he said, "Third Ohio." The crowd's low murmur edged along his spine. He raised his voice above the sound. "I hold nothing against any man, without I've got good reason to. I'll stay in Price City, I think, and do what I can."

Glancing at the lean-jawed men around him, Pete was sure there'd be little call for his services. Somehow, now, he didn't mind the prospect of slim pickings.

"Walton Springs is a Yankee town," Parklin said. "They've more'n we have in folks and money. But come a day—" He broke off as the wood-burner's whistle echoed again, farther off this time but unmistakable.

Pete watched their heads go up as if they were listening to the future. He caught the questioning in their eyes when they

faced him once more. And vaguely, that disturbed him.

"The railroad's bound to reach here, sometime," he said. "What with the way they're pushing here and there all over the land."

They nodded and grinned at that; then broke away into little groups talking excitedly among themselves.

Seth Parklin moved up to Pete in a single long stride, and extended his hand. Pete felt the warmth of his clasp; and the uneasiness in him grew.

But he swept it from his mind at the sound of the light tread coming toward them. The woman was walking over to join them.

Standing close to her, Pete saw the sober set of her fine mouth, the lustrous blue of her eyes, and something else in them that brought back his uneasiness: a doubt he couldn't fathom.

"Sally, this is Captain Wendel," Parklin said. "Come to stay a spell, I'm hoping. Captain, you'll find no better vittles in Price City than Sally Doan's."

Pete scarcely heard the mayor. He was intent on Sally Doan. His eyes followed hers as she glanced at his muddy half-boots. And meeting her eyes momentarily, he felt the heat at his cheeks. He remembered the lone greenback in his pocket.

He hadn't planned on room or board, or Sally Doan. Usually he spent the first nights in the livery stable, until he was ready to set up his office in a corner of the general store or any other place offered him, free.

"Welcome," she said. "Supper's at sundown, 'unless—"

"No," Pete replied hurriedly, "no, sundown's time enough. I'm not hungry."

"I'll be on hand whenever you're of a mind for talking," Parklin said. He half turned, stopped suddenly and signalled the man still leaning against the cottage wall. "Sim."

Sim straightened up, dropped the cotton-wood splinter, and sauntered forward. His eyes were red-rimmed, and the color tinged the tip of his sharp-pointed nose.

"Captain Wendel's afoot, Sim. I'd be obliged if you'd saddle my black Kentucky for him."

Sim moved to obey as though out of long habit. He took several paces, glancing

meantime at Pete; then he abruptly halted. "Reckoned you'd come by the stage," he said. "Never knowed a railroader to come a-walkin' if he could ride." He wheeled and disappeared around the side of the cottage.

"Pay him no mind, Captain," Parklin said. "Sim Butler used to be town marshal. The boys voted him out, but he's still some suspicious of strangers."

"It's losing his star that's soured Sim," Sally Doan said. "And the men taunting him whenever a stranger arrives. That'll make trouble some day, Seth."

"A man's got to hold his liquor right, or leave it alone. Sim Butler's never learned either way."

A railroader, Sim Butler had said. The uneasiness in Pete took shape now. He had been mistaken for someone else, someone important to Price City. He'd come afoot, on the wrong foot at that, and he knew it was time for him to go.

He turned to Sally Doan. She was looking at him, and yet, somehow, seeing beyond him. And Pete knew he couldn't leave Price City, the way things were with him now.

A HORSE nickered. Sim Butler reappeared, leading a graceful black mare. "Might be I've took to sayin' what I shouldn't," he murmured. "Ain't none of my concern how a man comes."

Parklin nodded. "For certain, Sim. For certain."

Pete glanced up the street, in the direction of the knoll where the free prairie began. Then slowly, feeling the weight of his blanket roll, he followed Sally Doan to the cottage.

Despite Seth Parklin's manner, he thought he'd caught in it an undercurrent of hesitation. But the mayor was moving away, alone. Pete heard Sim cluck the Kentucky to the hitching-rail.

"Sim will show you where to go," Sally Doan said at the doorway. She turned to Pete and raised her head high. "They've all been good to me since Tom Doan fell at Vicksburg. Price City and Kansas are home now—to all of us. The railroad spur line would mean a great deal. Home again to others wanting to come here, Yank or not. It wouldn't be the same, though, if the line was run out to Walton Springs in-

stead. Seth Parklin and the rest would hunt down the man who'd spoil that chance."

She was gone before he could speak. He stood there, wanting to follow and not wanting to tell her that he was not the railroad man she thought him. He knew by the sudden quiet that she waited inside, listening for the direction that he would take.

Sim Butler walked back then and silently motioned toward a canvas partition, to one side just past the door. Sim's lips curved in his leathery face, not in challenge this time but trying to look reassuring, as if he realized he had made a mistake.

"Seemed fair certain," he said, "you'd get here by the night stage." He cocked his head at the lowering sun. "Ain't due in for two-three hours." He studied Pete, and Pete had the feeling that he saw right through him. Sim grinned and spoke no more of the night stage. "You might say I'm around most all the time helpin' Sally Doan with this and that. Know the land hereabouts, too, and the way folks are a-thinkin'."

Pete kept his ears strained for the now-soundless rear of the cottage, where he thought Sally Doan had gone.

"Sometimes," he said loudly, "a man changes his plans."

Sim backed away, nodding. As he watched him, Pete made his decision. He unhitched his blanket roll, and stepped through the doorway. Noisily, he opened the canvas flap. He put down his roll on the iron bedstead. Then quickly he tiptoed to the door again.

Sim was not in sight. But the steady clomp of diminishing hoofbeats echoed from somewhere back of the cottage. Sim, he was sure, no longer played at being the town marshal. Sim knew better than all the others that a Topeka railroad man was due by the night stage, and not afoot.

He returned to his unopened roll and felt for the safety of the chloroform and the forceps. It was too late now, too late to show the tools of his trade and go his way if he wished. He looked up as the canvas flap swished back gently.

"It's never too late to right a wrong," Sally Doan said. "You can go your way, and not a question asked. I'll speak to Seth Parklin. Take his mount if you must. The

war's over; the time for spying is past."

"I'm staying," Pete replied. "Is that answer enough?"

She looked away a moment. "What do you want in Price City?"

"A home, maybe. Like the others you spoke of. You bade me welcome once, remember?"

"I welcomed you for Seth Parklin's sake," she replied. "Perhaps it would be for your own sake—if Walton Springs hasn't sent you here as a decoy to keep Price City's attention while they meet the man from Topeka."

"Then bid me welcome again, Sally Doan."

"You're not a railroader. Sim was right."

"I came pretending to be nothing other than what I am," Pete said.

Seth Parklin stood at the flap, silently watching. He moved in a little. "I'm not saying you came any other way, Captain. Sim's gone off to Walton Springs," he added quietly.

Pete saw the pleading in Sally Doan's eyes. He glanced at his blanket roll, and faced them again.

"You said supper's at sundown?"

They sat silently, Seth Parklin and Pete, while she brought in the buffalo steak. The pleading was still in her eyes as she went to and fro. For all the walking, and his hunger, Pete ate little.

He sat suddenly erect at the beat of hoofs resounding loud behind the cottage. As Parklin rose swiftly and departed, Pete made no move.

She stood at Pete's side then, saying: "Seth's a good man but unforgiving. They'll run you up the nearest cottonwood if you're playing some Yankee trick. Seth and Sim are out there now, and the Kentucky's waiting—"

Pete pushed back the chair. "You doubt me, and still you're asking me to go. Running away like a yellow-belly, I'd never see you again."

"I'd do the same for any man who pokes his head into a noose."

Seth Parklin's step was light and quick as he returned. His hands swung free, away from the sixgun at his waist.

"Sim says the Springs are quiet. By the look of things, no one's arrived there from Topeka. Captain, I'm hoping you under-

stand how it is. A man tries to right his mistakes. Sending Sim to find out, I reckon I've done no more than you'd do yourself. We knew the Topeka man was headed this way. But not exactly when, or where he'd stop first. Captain, we wouldn't like for him to go off now, not without giving us our chance for the railroad."

"No, it wouldn't be fair," Pete said, and glanced at Sally Doan.

"I figured you might see it like that," Parklin replied. "Captain, I'm not the one to be putting hair in the butter over something that's wanted and needed real bad, like the railroad is in Price City. A man's got to be certain, that's all."

PETE watched him leave, listened to him move to the rear of the cottage. Then Pete heard another step, a slithering one that he was sure belonged to Sim Butler.

He couldn't come out cold and tell Seth that Sim Butler was the one to watch. He thought he had guessed the truth in Sim's eyes, before. Now with Sim's wanting them to think that Pete was the Topeka man, it seemed even more certain. It set so in Pete's mind, and yet he told himself that he had no actual proof. There was only Sim's behavior, and the sourness that came to a man who had lost his marshal's star.

"It wouldn't be fair if Price City didn't have its chance," Sally Doan said softly. "It wouldn't be fair," she repeated, "even if you're not a spy from Walton Springs."

She had put the real truth into words for him. He had not come to Price City pretending to be anything other than the wandering dentist he was. The railroad was none of his business. Sim Butler was none of his business.

But he wanted to stay. She drew him and held him here. He wanted to help her, not Price City or Seth Parklin. Yet, he had no real call to stay. This fight was Price City's, not his.

Pete looked long at her, then turned without speaking.

He stepped into the silent street. It stretched ahead, velvety under the prairie stars. The Kentucky chomped the hard ground, its shadow silhouetted by the flares of the general store ready now for the arrival of the night stage. The chomping ceased abruptly, sealing the silence as Pete moved to the horse. Better maybe to be

caught and run up for a horse thief than a liar.

The inside of the store lay darkened. Pete glanced into the opaque blackness of a passageway that ran alongside the store. He clasped the reins on the hitching-rail, and suddenly held his fingers taut. A shadowy form shaped out of the passageway and trod silently toward him. He recognized the swinging coatrails.

Seth Parklin halted on the wooden walk abreast of the hitching-rail.

"The Kentucky's yours to ride," he said. "Though it'd please me none to see you go, Captain Wendel. I'd shoot down the man who stopped the coming of the railroad out of spite, or because of a hate kept against us. I'd give him his chance to say if it was only the hate in him, or a Yank trick. But if he said the Price City site wasn't good, and showed me fair the why of it, he could ride when and wherever he set his course."

"Might be I was just aiming to ride around, thinking things over," Pete replied quietly.

The slithering footfalls from behind broke into his speech. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Sim's lanky form. He glanced from one to the other, sandwiched as he was between them, and knew the time for speaking out still had not come. Letting his hand fall from the rail, he knew he wouldn't ride out on Sally Doan.

Silently, Pete walked back to the cottage. Sim's shadow skirted near by, then disappeared around the side of the cottage. Sim Butler was keeping the watch that Parklin undoubtedly had ordered.

Sally Doan was not indoors. At least, he heard no movement that might be hers. He went again to the front door. Now the street was deserted. Pete stepped softly into the canvas-partitioned cubicle.

He stumbled into a chair and searched his pockets for a sulphur match. The light of a chimney lantern that rested on a small packing box fell directly on his blanket roll. Kneeling down, he studied its uneven ends. He hadn't rolled his blanket like that. His fingers flew rapidly over the double raw-hide straps. The dark chloroform bottle, the shiny forceps, and squares of white calico cloths lay inside, apparently untouched. But some hasty hand had been at the blanket roll.

Sally Doan? That couldn't be her way of doing things. Nor Seth Parklin. He faced up to a man. Sim Butler; the sneak search would be Sim's way. And that meant that Sim knew for sure Pete wasn't from the railroad.

Pete's gaze lingered on the blanket roll, uncertain what step he ought to take next. The distant rumbling began then. It grew louder, sounding the swift, uneven gait of a team of horses. The night stage to Price City. He blew out the flickering light of the lantern.

HIDDEN in the shadows of the front door, Pete waited. The driver's "Yip-yip!" broke above the grinding of the yellow-spoked wheels. The stage slowed a little, then thundered on down the street. He glimpsed the single horse in the middle swing, where another should have been to make up the stage's triple-span.

For a moment the dust it raised covered the running man—Sim Butler.

Pete slid out of the doorway, then along the wall to the dark along the side of the cottage.

Now Sim Butler stood on the wooden walk, as though not believing that Price City had had no passenger.

The far-off rumbling of the stage ceased. The silence held, until the steady beat of a single rider echoed down over the knoll.

A horse cantered into the light of the store flares, and a heavy-set man dismounted. Sim hurried over to him.

The murmur of Sim's urging voice came clearly to Pete: "... sent me to Walton Springs, the mayor did. But I rode a-gallopin' to meet the stage twixt here and the Springs, and told you 'Price City didn't want the railroad. You promised to pick me up here and go to Walton Springs. You haven't changed your mind, have you?'"

The man shook his head. "I'm ridin' nowhere not till this gol-blasted ache goes." He groaned and clapped a hand to his swollen right cheek. "This toothache came suddenlike, and the swayin' of the coach made it worse. Got the driver to lend me a mount off his swing."

"Well, now, there's two good dentists in Walton Springs—" Sim said.

Pete moved out of the shadows. Sim Butler turned, and his hand went quickly

to his belt. The gleam of the six-shooter held Pete in his tracks.

"Keep comin', mister," Sim ordered, "and easylike. Seems I cut the ace. I ain't figured out your game yet, but it's a goin' to help mine sure. I seen your blanket roll."

"I'm sure about the game you're playing now," Pete said, shrugging. "But it makes no difference to me. It makes no difference where the railroad runs. I know one thing certain, though. I can't be helping anyone, not with a gun fixed on me. Makes me sort of nervous."

The Topeka man moaned. "What's this jackpot? Who's he?"

"Late surgeon-dentist, Third Ohio," Pete replied.

"A tooth-puller, I reckon. Mistook for yourself, a Topeka railroader." Sim grinned broadly. The gun hammer clicked; he motioned Pete toward the cottage.

Silently, they piled in behind the canvas flap.

Pete set the chair, then faced Sim Butler.

"You want it done quick, Sim, so you can go to Walton Springs? You've got to lend a hand."

"If you're thinkin' to ride with me to Walton Springs," the Topeka man said, "you'd better help out."

Sim hesitated, slowly nodded, then shoved the gun into his waist.

Pete leaned over his blanket roll, picked up the chloroform bottle and a calico square. "You won't feel a mite of pain," he told the Topeka man, as he uncorked the bottle. He quickly sniffed at the chloroform whose pungent odor was already spreading through the cubicle. Soaking the calico, he held it out to Sim. "Keep this to his nose while I ready the rest."

Pete's fingers closed hard over Sim's wrist, thrusting back the hand until it pressed against Sim's face. Sim's free hand struggled to reach his gun, then dropped away as Pete kneed him to the floor and held him there with the chloroform tight against his nose. The breath came loud out of Sim, uneven at first, in a regular heaving pattern. The kicking lessened and ceased. The chloroform had taken effect. Pete rose slowly.

The Topeka man jumped from the chair. "I'm getting out! There'll be no railroad spur line anywhere!" He stared at Pete

and stepped backward toward the canvas flap until it was roughly pushed aside.

Seth Parklin moved in, his sixgun drawn. Behind him stood Sally Doan.

"I thought the chloroform smell would be strong enough to bring you," Pete said.

"No need for a smell," Seth Parklin said. "The stink that's already here can't be mistaken this time. A sneaking, no-good spy. Getting Sim Butler out of the way, and getting ready to take off to the Springs with the Topeka man—"

"No, Seth," Sally Doan cried. "Please believe me. It isn't that. I saw Sim open this man's blanket roll, Sim knew he wasn't from the railroad. But did Sim ever speak a word of it to you?"

"Not for the sourness in him, and the marshal's star Walton Springs probably promised him," Pete said.

The Topeka man was holding his jaw. He glanced wildly from one to the other. "Can't we stop all this talk? I want my tooth pulled!"

Pete reached for his forceps. He looked at Sally Doan a moment, and his hand held steady. He studied the abscessed molar and the gum around it, red and inflamed. His hand dipped deftly. The tooth yielded to his knowing yank.

"Mighty bad," Pete muttered to the Topeka man, holding his forceps high in the air. "And the gum will need a spell of healing, too. No, sir, you can't leave now—anyway, not until you've seen how level the land is and how five miles can be saved by running the spur line to Price City."

The Topeka man grinned through his pain. "Not a mite of hurt, you said."

"The chloroform wasn't meant for you. I didn't think you'd need it."

Seth Parklin put down his gun. He glanced sorrowfully at Sim Butler on the floor, then faced Pete. "A man's that anxious sometimes, he sees only what he wants."

The smile flickered across Sally Doan's lips. "You're not the Topeka man. But when the railroad comes and there's a toothache in Price City, maybe we'll be glad you came."

Moving toward her, Pete couldn't speak for all the words that welled within him.

"Welcome then," she said. "For your own sake, Captain Wendel."

RUN, LAW-DOG, RUN

"Whenever you're ready,
Wade."



By
**DAY
KEENE**

THERE were, Wade Avers noted from the vantage of his hotel room window, few Texas men in the crowd. He would be alone in this thing he had come to do. After he had killed Bailey, he would have to ride—and fast.

Just before dark it rained for a few minutes, but not hard nor long enough to

Wade Avers had a thousand reasons for living—but a stronger one still for challenging the deadly guns of Sundown's famous marshal.

lay the dust. With night, scores of yellow lamps winked on in the saloons and stores. Here and there along the rough plank walk an enterprising merchant touched off a flaring coal-oil jack to attract attention to his wares.

The tempo of the night increased with every passing minute. Short-skirted dancing girls passed the window enroute to their place of employment. A tentative squeal of fiddles and tinkling of pianos invaded the deep silence left over from late afternoon. Still more riders, their dusty trail-herds settled for the night, or already bawling in the maze of corrals paralleling the railhead, left the distant circle of campfires and tied their sweat-lathered mounts to the long hitching racks. Both walks were crowded now with riders, ranchers, soldiers, hunters, cattle-buyers.

Wade continued to stand at the window, his hand on the butt of the gun in his holster. A big, blond youth with a round, full face, he watched the passing scene without emotion. Both his face and hands were deeply tanned by long exposure to the sun. His eyes, restless in their sockets, were blue and round and slightly flat. His face was freshly shaven. He was wearing his new white silk shirt and the black pants he had bought in Wichita Falls. He felt better fed and more rested than he had in years. For a week he'd done little but eat and sleep and listen to the legend of Jim Bailey.

Jim Bailey could hit a gnat's eye at fifty paces. Jim Bailey had tamed more railheads than all other marshals put together. Jim Bailey had killed thirty men. Wade was impressed but not frightened. He'd killed a few men himself. True, it had been in battle. But a man was just as dead if he died at Chickamauga or Lookout Mountain as he was if he was killed in a fair fight in the ankle-deep dust of Sundown.

At seven-thirty the train due in at six o'clock from Kansas City whistled for the railhead. Wade hoped Bailey was on it. He relaxed to the point of putting one boot on the sill and resting his arm on his knee.

Bailey had come on the train. A chorus of, 'Hi, Jim,' and 'Glad to see you back, Marshal,' followed him up the walk.

His first sight of the man shocked Wade. A tall, thin man with a big mustache, wearing a blue serge suit and a black derby hat,

Bailey looked more like a clerk in a general store than he did like an officer of the law. He wasn't even wearing a holster, although the heavy object sagging his side coat pocket was undoubtedly a gun.

Wade rolled a cigarette as he watched the man up the street. So that was the fabulous Jim Bailey. So that was the man who had killed Andy. His lips curled in contempt. Now he knew Andy had been drunk, blind drunk.

When Bailey was out of sight, Wade packed his saddle bags, went down stairs and paid his bill. He'd saddle his horse and tie him handy. Then he'd eat. After he'd had it out with Bailey, it might be a long time before he would dare to stop to eat again. It might be he would never be hungry.

"Headed back Texas way, eh?" the hostler at the stable asked.

"That could be," Wade admitted.

HE RODE slowly back up the street toward the little eating house he favored. He'd found it his first night in town and returned for every meal he'd eaten, because the food was plentiful and good, and because of the black-haired girl who ran it. She was, she said, from Georgia. She disliked Sundown intensely. Only the seeming impossibility of paying her current bills and still saving up stage and train fare kept her from returning home.

"It's not that I mind the work," she told Wade. "I like to work. But I'm getting tired of cooking with one hand and fending off drunken riders with the other."

The only other diner beside Wade, a saw-toothed gambler with soiled linen, eyed the black-haired girl thoughtfully as he picked his teeth. "I could use a girl like you in my business," he said finally. "How would you like to act as a shill for a faro game? You could make enough in a couple of weeks to get you back to Georgia."

Ann shook her head. "No, thank you."

Wade ordered a steak and coffee and canned peaches.

A fat man whose stomach hung in folds over his belt, the gambler sucked at a bit of residue the toothpick had failed to dislodge. "You're too good to be a shill, huh?"

The girl attempted to ignore him.

He refused to be ignored. "Ha. I'll bet if I was to offer you an eagle for a kiss,

you'd jump at the chance to earn it." To prove his point he laid a gold piece on the counter. "How's about it, cutie?"

Ann turned from the steak she was frying for Wade and pointed at the door. "Get out. Get out of here. And stay out."

The gambler lifted his bulk from the stool. "Now just a minute, cutie. Don't give me that stuff. You ain't no better than the dames up at the Bird Cage. And not as pretty as most. You wouldn't be in a railroad if you was."

Reaching across the counter, he caught her by the arm. Wade got to his feet to interfere. It wasn't necessary. Ann brought up the skillet with her other hand and threw it, steak and all, into the fat man's face.

Burned by the hot grease, he fumbled for the door and stumbled out onto the walk cursing her.

"See what I mean?" Ann said. Then she began to cry.

Wade felt uncomfortable. He knew horses and guns. At one time he'd thought he'd known cows. But women were new to him. He'd been too young to pay much attention to them before he'd gone away to war, and much too busy after he'd been in the Army.

Ann dried her tears on her apron. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for to cry. But I get so doggone mad. I'll start you another steak right away." She smiled. "And thanks for helping me."

Wade sat back on his stool. "I didn't do a thing."

Her smile brightened. "No. But you were willing to." She laid her hand on his arm. "Thank you very much, Mr. —?"

Wade wasn't ashamed of his name. He didn't mean to shoot Jim Bailey in the back. He meant to tell him his name and why he was gunning for him before he went for his gun. "Avers. Wade Avers," he told the girl.

She cooked his steak as he liked it, rare, then came around and sat at the counter with him while he ate. Wade wished that she hadn't touched him. He could still feel her hand on his sleeve. Six months, even a month ago, he could have gotten serious about this girl. With a girl like Ann for a wife, a man could bring the run-down old Lazy Y Bar to life again.

But now, with Andy to avenge, he wasn't

in any position to fall in love with any girl. He had a debt to settle. He had a hard, long ride to make. It could be he'd never see Texas again. It could be he'd never leave Sundown.

Ann had, he learned, been married. She stated it as a matter of fact. "To a boy who fought with Lee. He was killed at Chancellorsville. The war swept over the rest of my kin and most of us got scattered." She leaned her chin in the palm of her hand. "I thought some of going to Texas. But then I caught a ride with a family headed for Oregon." She shrugged. "And here I am."

Looking at his plate, Wade asked, "How come a pretty girl like you didn't get married again?"

"I aim to," Ann admitted. "As soon as the right man comes along." She waited for Wade to speak. When he didn't she asked him what sort of a place Texas was.

Wade grinned for the first time since he'd heard of Andy's death. "It's heaven, ma'am," he told her. "And I got me two thousand of the prettiest acres of it, with the old Brazos running right smack through 'em."

"Then how come you're in Sundown?" Ann asked. "You didn't come up with a trail herd." She blushed. "I know 'cause I asked around."

"It's a matter of business," Wade told her. "Personal business, ma'am."

Ann refused to be rebuffed. "What side did you fight on, Wade?"

His grin was wry. "The losing. I rode four years with Morgan. Me and Andy. We rode to hell and gone." He sighed. "If Lee hadn't surrendered, I guess we'd still be riding."

Ann wanted to know who Andy was.

"He was my brother," Wade told her. It was a long time since he had talked to anyone about Andy. He was grateful for the chance. "Andy was eight years older than me. Most too old to be a trooper. But he joined up when I did on account of, well, on account of ever since our old man died he'd always looked after me."

Admiring Wade's broad shoulders with her eyes, Ann smiled. "You don't look to me like you need much looking after. No, sir. You're quite some lot of man."

The nearness of her disturbed him. The fragrance of her hair made his pulse pound.

His nerve ends tingled as if he'd been drinking on an empty stomach. He scotched the fire before it could grow and burn him. "They grow us big in Texas, ma'am," he said curtly. "And I'm heading back that way tonight. Alone."

The light died out of Ann's eyes. "Oh. I see." Standing up she tucked in a loose wisp of hair that persisted in tumbling over her forehead and walked in back of the counter. "Well. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Avers. Give my regards to Texas."

"I'll do that," Wade assured her.

SHE filled his coffee cup without asking if he wanted more and began to wipe the heavy crockery plates she'd washed and set to drain. Wade tried not to look at her slim back. It aroused emotions best suppressed. Knowing as little as he did about all women but May, and feeling as he did about her, he certainly didn't intend to make a fool of himself about a black-haired little railhead hash-house owner.

Besides he had Andy to think of. He tried to think of him, and couldn't. Not with Ann's trim figure weaving in front of his eyes.

Rolling a cigarette with fingers that shook slightly, he tried to assure himself that no matter how nice they seemed, all women were like May. They sweet-talked you to your face and did you dirt as soon as your back was turned. For all she had told off the fat gambler, Ann was no different from the rest.

His father should never have married May. He could still see his father's face, white and strained, watching the road into town as the hands of the kitchen clock swept up to midnight and passed it without the old buckboard rolling into the yard. After the old man had died and they had moved into the Falls, it had been even worse. Then his stepmother had brought her succession of friends to the house.

"Here's a two-bit piece, Wade. Be a good boy and go up town and buy yourself a sack of jaw-breakers. And don't come back in the house as long as a rig is hitched to the rack."

Only Andy had been good and clean and fine. Only Andy had asked him if he'd eaten and how he was getting along in school. Andy had taught him how to ride and rope and shoot. And after Andy had

gotten in with Marsdale, he'd taken him out to the Circle B and let him live with him. He'd been happy in the bunkhouse. He'd been happy riding with Morgan, knowing as soon as the war was over they were going to ranch the Lazy Y Bar again.

Now Andy was dead. Killed by a marshal who looked like a shoe clerk in a two-bit railroad called Sundown.

Wade looked at the clock on the wall. It was five minutes of nine, time for him to get started. Getting to his feet, he laid his last gold piece on the counter. As Ann counted his change into his palm her fingertips touched his hand and the brief contact made Wade catch his breath. It could be all women weren't the same. It could be Ann was sweet and good. He couldn't go wifeless forever. It wasn't natural or normal. Even Andy had laughed at him.

"You won't need to be told when the right one comes along, kid," he had laughed. *"You'll know it. It'll be just like having half of Texas fall on you. Only, believe me, Wade, much nicer."*

His voice husky and strange to his own ears, Wade said, on impulse, "Look, Ann."

The light came back in her eyes. "Yes, Wade?"

Color creeping into his cheeks, Wade forced himself to continue. "I've a little business in town to take care of. Gun business. Can be I won't get to head back for Texas. But if I do—"

He stopped short as the door of the eating house opened and Jim Bailey came in. Seen close up, the man looked even less like a killer than he had in the flare of a coal-oil-jack.

He had changed his derby for a Stetson and he was wearing a well-worn belt and holster now. But neither change had added menace to his appearance. He still looked like a kindly old farmer masquerading as a marshal.

Comparing him to Andy made Wade hot. Andy wouldn't have worn such a hat or carried such a gun. Andy had always had to have the best of everything. Now Andy was dead, killed by a meek-mannered old hayseed with a tin star on his vest.

Ann caught at Wade's hand to return his attention to what he had been saying as Bailey sat on a stool and studied the bill-of-fare chalked on the blackboard next to the range. "Yes, Wade?"

Wade considered the situation. He didn't want to make his play in the eating house. It wouldn't be fair to Ann, for one thing. For another, he wanted to kill Jim Bailey in front of the same men who'd watched him kill Andy. He wanted Bailey to savor death before he died. He wanted Bailey to know why he was dying.

"Forget I said anything," he told Ann and walked out of the eating house. Out on the walk, he looked back. Bailey was still looking at the bill-of-fare. All he could see was Ann's back, but from the way that her shoulders were slumped it looked as if she was crying.

Slipping his rein, he rode slowly up the street to kill time until Bailey had eaten. The saloons and honkatonks were running full blast now. There was music and drunken laughter back of the batwings. And probably sudden death. Wade meant for there to be one at least before the night was over. Either his or Bailey's. It didn't matter much which. It was the least he could do for Andy.

THE double row of stores and bars and clip joints gave away to a section of squalid shacks. After his father had died and May had moved into town, it had been in a shack like one of these in which he had spent his childhood. Here there was no sound but the occasional cry of a child, the laugh of a drunken woman, and the clop of his gelding's hoofs in the deep dust. Wade instinctively clucked to the gelding. He felt as if he were choking. He wanted to get out where the night and the air was clean.

As he rode, he thought of Andy. Andy hadn't been perfect. Andy had liked easy money. Riding for Marsdale had taught him that. With Andy it had been easy come and easy go. He'd corralled a lot of money and spent it. But this last trip north with Marsdale was to have been the last. And there had been nothing outside the law about it. All Andy had wanted to do was buck one more real live game for a big enough stake to stock the Lazy Y Bar. And just because he'd crossed a hayseed who didn't like Texas boys, Jim Bailey had shot him dead. He'd shot Andy when he was drunk. Most too drunk to stand, according to the story Rags Marsdale had brought back.

Just thinking of it made Wade hot. Wheeling his horse, he rode back into Sundown. It wasn't too early to begin to spread the word. He wanted Jim Bailey to know he'd waited a week for him and was calling for a showdown tonight.

Dismounting and snubbing his horse, Wade took the bars as they came. "I'm looking for Bailey. The famous Jim Bailey," he told the head barman in the Bird Cage. "He killed my brother, Andy, back some months ago. If you should happen to see the marshal, tell him Wade Avers is looking for him, will you? And tell him to go for his gun when he sees me."

The barman continued to polish the already gleaming wood. "I'll do that, mister." He leaned across the bar and asked in a booming whisper that carried the length of the saloon, "And after you draw on Jim Bailey, just where do you want us to ship your body?"

A bleached blonde laughed shrilly and her laughter proved contagious. A man nudged the man next to him. "And just where do you want us to ship your body?" Soon all the men in the saloon were whooping with mirth and pounding each other on the back.

His face white with anger, Wade controlled his temper. His quarrel wasn't with these jokers. His quarrel was with Jim Bailey. He walked stiff-kneed out of the Bird Cage and down the walk to the Golden Pheasant.

The fat gambler who had insulted Ann was leaning against the bar of the fifth saloon in which Wade issued his warning. When Wade had finished, the gambler took his toothpick from his mouth and jeered, "You'd better fork your bronc, boy, and high-tail back to Texas. Otherwise you'll go back in a pine box."

Wade said that remained to be seen. "Hell, boy," the gambler scoffed. "I could take you myself if it wasn't so much trouble." He swung his belly back to the bar. "All you're trying to do is show off to impress that black-haired little witch who runs the eating house."

Wade caught his shoulder and swung him around. "You take that back."

"Why should I?" the fat man asked nastily.

The buzz of conversation at the bar became a subdued blur. Back of the bar the

barman reached for a bung starter, then said flatly:

"Get out, Texan. Run along like the fool you are and get yourself killed by Bailey. But I don't want any shooting in this bar. It's too hard on the mirrors."

Wade stood, undecided. The gambler was fat. But fat men were often deceptively fast. If he shot it out with him and caught a slug in a bad place, his chance to kill Bailey would be gone. Relaxing, he shifted his weight from the balls of his feet and unhooked his thumbs from his gun belt.

"I'll see you later, Mr. Gambler. After I've had my frolic with Bailey."

The gambler turned back to the bar again, winking at the men looking into the back-bar mirror. "Then I guess it's safe for me to order a drink without fear it will be wasted. But just to show that I'm a sport, I'll give you my solemn word, sonny, that I'll pat your pine box good-by at the station."

THE resulting wave of laughter washed Wade out of the saloon. He walked on slowly down the walk.

Ann stopped him in front of the eating house. Her big brown eyes looked worried. Catching at his arm, she said, "Oh, thank God you came by, Wade, before anything happened. This rumor I hear is true? You're gunning for Marshal Bailey because he killed that big Texan four or five months ago? He was Andy?"

Wade nodded curtly. "He was."

"Then you mustn't," Ann insisted. "You haven't the straight of it, Wade. Your brother deserved killing."

Wade removed her hand from his sleeve. "You mind your business, ma'am, and I'll mind mine."

Ann persisted, "But you haven't a chance with Bailey, Wade. He'll kill you."

Wade rolled a cigarette. "So what's that to you?"

The black-haired girl opened her mouth to say something and changed her mind. What she said was entirely different from that which she had intended to say. "If you don't know, there's no need of my telling you. You're an even bigger fool than I gave you credit for being." She stood aside to allow him to pass. "Go ahead. Get yourself killed. There are a lot

of better men in the world, I suppose."

Wade walked on sucking at his cigarette. He wished Ann would get out of his life. It seemed almost impossible a girl he had known only a week, then only casually, could affect him as she did. The sight of her made it difficult for him to breathe. There was the same hard lump in his throat that had been there when he'd made his first cavalry charge.

Doggedly determined, he made the round of the remaining saloons and honkatonks. Several times he saw one or another of Jim Bailey's deputies but never was able to catch up with the man himself. Bailey had been in the Silver Dollar a few minutes previously. The owner of the Last Chance thought he had gone over to the wagon yard. A girl in the Nugget said she'd heard he was playing cards in the back room of the express office.

The night grew older and colder. One by one the coal-oil jacks in front of the mercantile establishments snuffed out as merchants locked their doors and went home. The tempo of the saloons and honkatonks rose to a new high pitch, then faded away to a whisper as drunken riders weaved their way back to their camps or hotel rooms. Great gaps began to appear in the solid ranks of hitched horses. Then only a few were left, Wade's impatient gelding among them.

He felt angry and put upon. Bailey had deliberately evaded him. There was contempt in the gesture. The older man was so secure in his reputation as a killer that he didn't need to worry about his fellow townsmen doubting his courage. Bailey merely hadn't wanted to be bothered by killing another young gun punk.

Now the saloons and honkatonks were closing. A white moon rose over the false fronts and painted the ankle-deep dust silver. Soon the only light left was a yellow lamp in the window of the eating house. Wade was bitter as he looked at it. Now even Ann was probably laughing at him. He'd ridden a thousand miles to avenge Andy, and all he'd gotten was exercise.

There was only one thing he could do, check back into the hotel and have another try for Bailey tomorrow. Wading the dust to his gelding, he was reaching for his saddle bags when the voice reached out of the shadows of a wooden awning.

"You there, Avers. This is Marshal Jim Bailey talking. And I hear that you're looking for me."

WADE cursed himself for a fool. He was standing in full moonlight. He couldn't even see the outline of Bailey's body. So this was how Bailey killed his men. He waited until drink had slowed their draw or caught them at a disadvantage. Wade would have to give the other man first shot and fire at the flash of his gun.

"That's right," he said curtly. He turned to face the voice, his right hand hovering over the butt of his gun. "Go ahead. Make your play, Bailey."

The voice was surprisingly gentle for that of a man who, reputedly, had killed thirty men. "You're game, son. Dead game. Aim to fire at the flash of my gun, eh? But before you do, might I ask why?"

"You killed my brother," Wade said hotly. "You killed Andy when he was too drunk to stand, let alone buck a gun."

"Oh," Bailey said quietly. "I see. And who told you that story, Wade?"

"Rags Marsdale," Wade said. "And it isn't a story. When he was sober, Andy was the fastest man in Texas."

A cold note crept into Bailey's voice. "Then he should have stayed in Texas. So Rags Marsdale was the other hombre's name. Kin to you?"

Wade shook his head. "No, he's just a neighbor."

"Take over your spread, I imagine, if you don't come back."

"That's possible," Wade admitted.

"Thought so," Bailey said. He was silent a moment, then said, "So I killed your brother, Wade. Shooting it out with me isn't going to bring him back to life. Even if you manage to get me, all it's going to do is get you in a jam."

"I'll chance that."

Bailey continued as if he hadn't spoken. "There'll be a pine box if I get you—a posse on your tail if I don't. More important, you'll be known as the man who killed Jim Bailey. You'll have a reputation to live up to. I know. Every louse crawling out of the woodwork who fancies himself a gunman will want to have a try for the man who killed Bailey. You'll have to kill and kill again."

Wade jeered, "Ha. Look who's talking. You seem to like to kill men."

He could sense the other man shaking his head. "No," the gentle voice continued, "I wouldn't say that. But on account of I've been lucky so far, it's become a part of my job. And I'm no different than any other man. I'm married. I've got mortgage payments on my ranch to meet. I've got kids to feed and shoes and levis and dresses to buy. To do that I not only have to do the job I'm paid for, I have to stay alive."

"So you shoot men from the dark?"

"Have I shot you?"

Wade's nerves were cracking from the strain. "Go ahead. Make your play."

"In a minute," Bailey said. "Ever kill a man before, Wade?"

"Lots of them."

"In a two-man showdown or in battle?"

"In battle," Wade admitted.

Bailey sighed. "It's different. I can't tell you just how, but it is. Men killed in battle don't come back to sleep with a man of nights. Some of the other ones do. It's that way with your brother, Andy. I liked Andy on sight. I hated like hell to kill him."

"I'll bet you did."

Bailey was silent a long moment, then he said, "Well, I don't guess there's any use talking to you. But if you do get back to Texas, I'd keep an eye on that Rags Marsdale. I wouldn't put much faith in a man who'd plan with a buddy to rob a bank and then run out when the getting got rough. And that's what happened, son. I caught 'em dead to rights. And I'd have got Marsdale, too, if he hadn't run out on Andy." He added, almost as if he were speaking to himself, "I liked Andy right well. A shame he had to step over the line."

A lump of ice appeared out of nowhere and lay heavy in Wade's stomach. Marsdale had lied to him. Failing to buck the tiger successfully, he and Andy had tried to hold up the Sundown bank. Andy hadn't been drunk. Rags had just made that up to get him sore enough to have a try for Bailey. Rags had wanted the Lazy Y Bar for a long time.

"Well," the man on the walk said quietly, "if it has to be, it has to. Let's get it over, son."

Wade tensed, expecting a flash to appear under the awning of the bank. Instead,

Bailey jumped from the walk to the road and, plainly revealed in the moonlight, walked slowly toward him through the dust.

His voice continued calm and gentle. "Whenever you're ready, Wade."

Wade felt sick, but not from fear. It was suddenly all so futile. Andy had broken his word to him. He'd meant to stock the ranch with stolen money. And Bailey had shot him in fair fight. Now either he or Bailey would die. And either way, Rags would have the spread. A dead man couldn't ranch. A wanted man didn't dare light in one place long enough.

Bailey was so close now he could see the other man's eyes. Bailey meant to kill him if he could. He had to live to buy shoes and levis and dresses. Killing men who wanted to kill him was merely his job.

Wade's hand dropped to his side. His voice was thick. "You win." He added, defiantly, "Not that I'm afraid."

"No," Bailey agreed, "you're not afraid."

It takes a real man to admit he's wrong." Stooping, he scooped up a handful of dust and let it trickle through his fingers. "It's only a few years until that's you and I, Wade. So much dust. And we've got to make the best of what we have. Now get on back to Texas. And you're more of a fool than I think you are if you ride out of town alone."

"Yes, sir," Wade said meekly.

He knew now why Ann had tried to stop him. She'd wanted him to live. She wanted to go back to Texas with him. And all women were no more alike than all men were. Some were good and some were bad. And Ann was good.

"Good night, son," Bailey said quietly.

"Good night, Marshal," Wade answered.

"And—thanks."

Then, a slow smile crinkling the leather of his sun-bronzed cheeks, his shoulders squared and his head held high, Wade strode through the silver dust toward the only lighted window in Sundown.

PAUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

There was sadness in the wagon train camped near Scott's Bluff along the Platte this spring of 1847. A wife and mother had passed away and friends were digging her grave. There wasn't anything suitable in camp, it seemed, that could be used for a headstone.

But ingenuity found a way, as it always did with the pioneer. All night long a friend of the departed labored with a cold-chisel to crudely letter an obituary in a length of wagon tire. This was driven into the ground the next morning, and the train moved on.

Years passed, many years. Then, one day, surveyors of the Burlington Railroad came driving their right-of-way stakes along the Platte. In the high grass of the bottom land the wagon tire escaped detection till they were right on top of it, and could decipher the inscription chiseled in the rusty metal: *Rebecca Winters, age 50 years.*

"Boys," said the boss surveyor, "we can't run our rails over a grave. We'll rerun the line."

And so they did, going back several miles to make the change.

The story was given to the press. Relatives of Rebecca Winters read it and caused a headstone of Utah marble to be placed with the almost indecipherable wagon tire.

A poet commemorated the event:

*"Boys," said the leader, "we'll turn aside,
Here, close by the trail, her grave shall stay,
For she came first to this desert wide.
Rebecca Winters holds right of way."*

—R. V.

HIGHWAY



ONE OF the most important rivers in United States frontier history is the fabulous Chagres River, which is not in the United States at all, but in the Isthmus of Panama, thousands of miles away.

Centuries before the lumbering Conestogas had crossed the Western plains, vivid legends of the Chagres had been written in blood and gold by Vasco Balboa, the Conquistadores, and the Spanish King; by Gregor MacGregor, Henry Morgan, and Sir Francis Drake; by the slave traders, and the terrible Cimarrones. This was the Castilla del Oro—the Golden Castile—the crossroads between two mighty oceans, and the gateway to the wealth of continents, and for hundreds of years it was the scene of

fighting, stealing, and dying, as men struggled for riches and for power.

After the gold had been depleted, after the imperialistic greed had been quelled by the stern Monroe Doctrine, the Chagres became just another lazy tropical stream. Then James Marshall discovered gold in Sutter's Mill, and once again the Chagres became the gateway to fantastic treasures and its waters were stained with blood.

The U. S. Mail Steam Line, *Falcon*, bound for Chagres, was sailing down the eastern coast when the world went crazy with gold fever. When the ship docked at New Orleans, 178 hard-eyed men swarmed aboard and answered the captain's orders to leave by significantly tapping the revolvers strapped to their thighs.

The moment the *Falcon* reached Chagres, the contingent of gold-seekers rushed ashore, clamoring for transportation to Panama. One way was by means of the bungos—the crude native craft used in transporting bananas downstream. The natives were willing to carry passengers for a price, but true to their philosophy of leisure, felt that *manana* was the time to start. Once more six-shooters were used in place of tickets.

A few days later the *Crescent City* reached Chagres, followed by other ships that had been pressed into service, and in a short time close to a thousand gold-crazed men thronged the tiny village, madly searching for boats that would take them upstream as far as Cruces. Some of the gold-seekers refused to wait, unwilling to believe that the trek to the Pacific—forty miles as the crow flies—could be too difficult. After a day or two, the blazing sun, the torrential rains, and the swarms of insects combined to make them change their minds. If they continued, and were lucky, they lived to soak their feet in the Pacific a week later.

Meanwhile, at Cruces, the value of money went down as the value of mules, shelter, and food went soaring. And at Panama men gambled, fought and killed for a ticket that would take them to the golden land of California.

of GOLD By COSTA CAROUSSO

California gold fever made Chagres, Panama, a brawling, gun-ruled town—and wrote an exciting chapter in frontier history.

The greatest part of the cargo that went up the Chagres was mining equipment, then cats. Food was scarce in California, and rats were plentiful, and the prospectors in San Francisco were willing to pay as much as twenty-five dollars for an alley cat bought in the gutters of New Orleans for a few pennies.

Bungo fare rose steadily, till it cost \$50 to go upstream as far as Cruces or Gorgona. Then, when the Aspinwall-Gatun part of the Panama Railroad was completed and the bungo distance cut by ten miles, the fares began to drop again. Soon, shallow-draft side-wheelers were pressed into service on the Chagres, a fleet of fifty lifeboats was imported, hundreds of Kentucky mules were brought in, and daily transport for a thousand passengers each way was possible.

Two years after Marshall's discovery, Chagres had become a Yankee town, similar to any brawling, gun-ruled town along the Western frontier, except for the absence of hitching racks. There were two hotels whose huge rooms were filled to overflowing with cots. There were small, hurriedly thrown-up shacks built of scrap wood and packing crates. There was a Silver Dollar Saloon, where rotgut sold for a dollar a drink; there was a gambling casino, and the painted ladies carried six-shooters. There was no sheriff, no law enforcement, no law.

The Pacific Mail boats from Frisco were bringing enormous shipments of gold and silver to Panama, and robbery was not long in coming. The first large theft was in the summer of 1851, when a train belonging to Howland & Aspinwall was held up and \$30,000 stolen. The Wells-Fargo agent wrote to his New York offices and requested guns, ammunition, and powder, but these did not deter the bandits. The next haul netted \$120,000. After that, holdups began to boom, both in frequency and in size. When a pack train near the Gorgona fork was shot up and robbed of \$250,000, the

Panama Railroad Company decided it was time for action.

The sum total of its activity was the importation of a single man from Texas. Not quite twenty-one, small, weighing only 135 pounds, the only impressive thing about Ran Runnels was his record with the Texas Rangers. Runnels took a room in a small Panama boarding house, looked around for a few days, then bought a string of mules and put up a sign in front of his stables advertising that he was proprietor of an ocean-to-ocean express service that was both safe and prompt. He interviewed his prospective drivers secretly, and for weeks little activity stirred in the vicinity of his office. His drivers apparently did nothing except loaf and drink at the waterfront dives. Banditry continued as usual.

The break, when it came, arrived with a thoroughness that left the people of Panama gasping. Looking at the stone walls that the king of Spain had built years ago, they stared aghast at the sight of thirty-seven bodies swinging from their necks in the gentle breeze.

The governor had granted Runnels, through the Panama Railroad Company, absolute power across the isthmus, and Runnels used that power to the utmost. For three months everything was quiet. Then seven Americans returning to the States with a fortune from the gold fields were found murdered. Again Runnels' men went into action, and this time forty-one culprits were hanged.

In the three years that it took to complete the trans-isthmus railroad, Runnels applied the hemp treatment to over a hundred bandits before those who remained alive decided to go into business elsewhere. Along the entire frontier, there was no other place where the stakes were richer than at this Highway of Gold, but Runnels, with his ruthless, fearless efficiency, succeeded in making it the most dangerous place in the world for an outlaw to follow his trade.

COWBOY FROM HELL

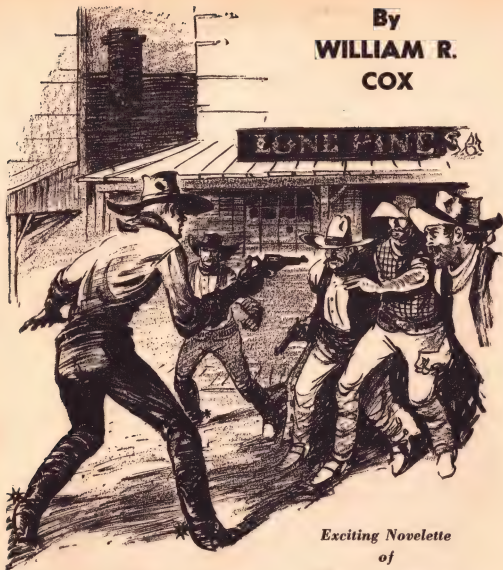
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Poke said, "Fill your
hand, Meagre!"

In that hate-triggered valley, one word could expose Poke Bramwell's daring masquerade—and reveal to hot-headed Jimmy Beck that he'd hired on the brother of his own father's murderer!

By
**WILLIAM R.
COX**



*Exciting Novelette
of
Western Vengeance*

CHAPTER

Sixgun Practice

1 Poke Bramwell rode into the valley with the noon sun, and the dust was like a pattern from yesterday upon his blue shirt and worn jeans. The little ranch perched upon a sloping terrain that ran down to the precious water, and he knew that he had arrived at his destination.

The J B was strategically perfect, he saw. To the north ran the spreading acres

of Drake Meagre's Bar X, with its thousand head of cattle and its hard crew of riders. To the south was the even larger outfit, the T Z of the Gordon family. The J B was a buffer—or a bar—between the two great ranches of the Apache Valley.

Poke Bramwell rode on. The J B ranch house was small, unpainted, but severely neat. There was no one in front, but smoke came from the kitchen chimney. Near the corral a figure stood facing a board fence. Poke reined in and sat watch-

ing for a moment, his face expressionless.

The tall kid was lanky, loose-jointed. He would be about eighteen, Poke thought. He stood, apparently relaxed, somewhat a w k w a r d in posture. Suddenly he crouched, his right hand flashed to the pistol holster at his hip. A gun flashed in the sunlight, and the thin arm jabbed forward. The muzzle of the weapon jammed against the fence; the trigger clicked smoothly. The youth looked down then, peering, holding the gun steady.

Poke said dryly, "That's a nice draw."

The kid whirled. He had a lean face and his eyes were pale blue. He stared and for a moment a flaming hatred was in him, so that Poke shivered despite the warmth of the sun. Then the fire died and the boy said, "Howdy, stranger. Light and rest yourself."

Poke dismounted. He walked over to where a spike had been driven through the far side of the fence. There were indentations in the wood, very close to the sharp end of the spike. There were a few round marks encircling the spike. Poke drawled, "Kinda hard on a gun, jabbing it at that nail. It'll muck up the muzzle."

The boy shrugged. "This ain't my good gun."

Poke said, "It makes for steadiness, all right. You got speed." He stepped forward. His own gun was slung low. He crouched, yanked it out, planted it firmly over the protruding nail, held it without cocking, his left hand over the hammer.

The boy's eyes gleamed a little. He said, "You're smooth, stranger."

"I'm Poke." The statement stood, without embellishment, in the Texan fashion.

"I'm Jimmy Beck," said the lad gravely, extending his hand. "This here is my spread. Come and eat."

"Don't mind if I do," said Poke politely.

When he had tended his horse, he went inside. Jimmy, his face washed, was sitting at the table already. An ancient man with a very dark face and jet black hair was deftly setting forth platters of food. There were meat and biscuits light as feathers and two vegetables. Jimmy said, "Brownie and me run the place. Brownie can do anything."

Brownie stopped in the midst of serving and stared hard at Poke. He said harshly. "You certainly favor Leb Bramwell."

Jimmy was not eating. His young face showed distaste for such blunt questioning of a stranger.

Poke drawled, "Was he from hereabouts? I'm Arizona, myself."

Brownie's voice was like the rasp of a file. "He's in the pen—and he'll be head-in' fast for hell if ever he gets out and we find 'im. He murdered Jimmy's pa."

Poke said, "Whew. And I look like him?"

Jimmy broke in quickly. "Not really. Just a little. At first I thought so."

Brownie grunted. "Mighty good thing, too, stranger."

Jimmy lowered his eyes and began eating. He was, Poke realized, a poised youth with good manners and plenty of brains.

When the meal was finished Poke helped the old man redd up, but Jimmy went out the front door and sat on the porch.

Brownie, who seemed a garrulous codger, said in a low voice, "I feed him good an' we do what we kin. But how much ranchin' kin two men do? They'll pinch him. Meagre's ridin' in today."

POKES dried dishes, keeping silent. The old man rambled on and it was easy to piece together the story. Big Jim Beck had been an easy-going man whose only love was his son.

But Big Jim liked to drink on a Saturday and gamble more than somewhat, and the rider from the Bar X, Leb Bramwell, had tangled with him in town one night. They had picked up Big Jim with a bullet in his back and Sheriff Zeke Castle arrested Leb. The jury sent Leb to the pen for life.

"It's a hard thing for a waddy to go to jail," said Poke quietly.

"He'd be dead if they left him here!" snarled Brownie.

"Reckon so," murmured Poke.

There was the sound of horses out front and then the sound of voices. He stood near the door, pretending not to listen, but with ears straining for every syllable.

Brownie paused in his labors and shamelessly joined him. The old man's seamy countenance lost its belligerence, and Poke was aware suddenly that Brownie was frightened, helpless, pathetic, totally devoted to Jimmy Beck. The heavy voice which dominated the play came boom-

ing through to them, impossible not to overhear.

"It's like this, Jimmy. Miss Mary and me would be proud to have you live with us, at the Bar X. You'd have a better life, anyway you look at it. I'll give you a good price for the ranch."

Jimmy's soft accents said, "I won't sell to you, Drake."

Brownie clutched involuntarily at Poke's arm and his old eyes lighted up.

There was silence. Then a feminine voice, very sweet and low, said, "You mean you will sell to me, Jimmy?"

Brownie held his breath. His grip was suddenly amazingly strong, but Poke did not stir.

Jimmy said, "I might. But not right now. I got something to work out."

Meagre cut in impatiently, "You can't brood over Big Jim forever, you know."

Jimmy's heel scraped against the porch step. He was standing, and Poke could see the back of his young head through the window, inclined slightly toward the big man upon the black horse. The man had florid, handsome features and wore an air of complete arrogance.

Beyond him the girl stood at her bay horse's head. She was blonde and not much older than Jimmy. She was so beautiful that Poke started, feasting his eyes upon her.

Jimmy's voice, icy and controlled, said, "I'll thank you not to talk like that, Drake. You made me an offer. I'm telling you no!"

Meagre said sharply, "Now look here, button! You're not in a position to—"

Mary Gordon said, "Drake! Jimmy is my friend!"

For a moment it seemed that Meagre would explode. His features suffused with red blood; his neck swelled. Poke gently disengaged Brownie's grasp and stepped into the living room.

Then Meagre said, "You'll sell. I'll see you again." Visibly fighting for control, he spurred the black horse, rode away.

Poke straightened, kept on going. He reached Jimmy's side, saw that the boy was calm, unafraid. The girl's eyes came to him and deliberately he held them.

Jimmy said, "This is Poke, Miss Mary. He just stopped by."

Poke said, "I was thinkin' of stayin' on

awhile. Brownie and me were just talking about it."

Behind him, Brownie lied eagerly, "Yep. Poke's a tophand."

Mary Gordon said, "That would be fine. Jimmy, don't sell if you'd rather not. I know how you feel."

For the first time the youth's composure broke slightly. He stepped forward, taking the girl's hand. He said, "You're my best friend, Mary."

She flushed faintly and stepped back, reaching for her reins. "Drake's temper needs toning down. Glad to have met you, Mr. Poke. I know you'll help Jimmy a lot." She mounted swiftly, with exceeding grace. She nodded to them, still blushing, and rode south towards her T Z spread.

Jimmy said, "Reckon I could use you, Poke. But as to pay—"

"Forget it," drawled Poke. "I got a little stake. I'd like to roost and stay set for a little while. I'll take a small share."

CHAPTER

2

"Fill Your Hand!"

Saturday a week, driving with Jimmy in the buckboard, Poke said, "You got Hereford in your stock. You got a nice little spread. Properly worked, the ranch would pay you good."

Jimmy clucked at the matched bays and said, "Big Jim and me fished and hunted a lot but we always had good stock."

"You were right not to sell," Poke said.

Jimmy was imperturbable. "If Miss Mary wants it, I'll sell. Drake rubs me the wrong way."

They rattled into town and the dust from the street came up around them. Walnut Bend was the county seat and a cheerful little gathering of adobe houses and saloons. The Saturday crowd was already gathering, sunbonneted women chatting on the steps of the general store, cowboys swagging in the streets, ranchers going in and out of the tiny bank, the swinging doors of the bars clacking regularly. Jimmy swung into the hotel yard and said, "Meet you at the Lone Pine?"

Poke said, "Yeah. Can I help at the bank?"

"Mister Grant knows me," said Jimmy. "We don't need much money. He'll let me have it."

Poke said, "You can pay it back, all right. Well, good luck."

He swung out on Main Stret. He went into the Lone Pine and had a quick one—the first in weeks. He tok a hitch at his belt and strolled among the people of the Valley, his eyes going left and right, searching. He found the one-room office with the sign above it: *Sheriff*.

He walked past, hesitated, then quickly slipped inside under cover of some passing ranch wives. He closed the door behind him and turned to face a very fat man.

The fat man said, "Hello, Bramwell. Been expectin' you."

Poke said, "Don't call me Bramwell. I'm working at the J B ranch."

Sheriff Zeke Castle whistled with fat lips. He said, "Light and unloosen."

Poke sat down facing the door, putting the sheriff on his left, so that the light was in the fat man's face. He said, "Jim Beck was shot with a .44 Winchester. Leb Bramwell had such a gun, but so did lots of others. How come the jury sent Leb to jail?"

"Leb couldn't alibi himself," said Castle. "He'd threatened Big Jim. He was on the road that night. Big Jim was a right popular man. But there never was no real evidence. That's how come I wrote you to come on down."

Poke said, "Who else could have shot Big Jim?"

The fat man's eyes seemed to retreat into the folds of fat. "Lots of people. But nobody had any reason I kin find. There's people think I'm a dumb character. But I'm the sheriff and they don't talk around me."

"I'll have a better chance," said Poke. "Thanks for working with me, Zeke."

"I ain't," said the sheriff flatly. "But I'm willin' to consider evidence."

Poke said, "I'll be around with some."

He got up and waited for another group of shopping women. He slipped out among them and found himself looking into the blue eyes of Mary Gordon. He touched his hat and started to turn away, but in a moment there was a tug at his sleeve. He looked down at the girl.

She said, "How are things going at the J B? Is Jimmy working hard?"

"Things are fine," said Poke gravely.

She said, "Drake is looking for him to-

day. I wish you would sort of rally around Jimmy."

Poke took three steps before he answered. "I thought you and Meagre were gettin' married."

She blushed easily, he decided. It was very attractive. She said, "It's not—settled."

Poke said, "Thought I might ride over some night. Pay a little visit. Like to see your layout."

The flush deepened, but she said pleasantly, "I'll be glad to see you."

They parted before the general store. Poke strolled toward the Lone Pine.

Two men came surging through the doors of the Lone Pine. One held the other at arm's length and battered him with a hard and active fist. The second slumped, unconscious, and Poke saw that the aggressor was Drake Meagre.

Once more the big fist went back, ready to drive into the helpless man who dangled in Meagre's grasp. The blow might easily be fatal, Poke knew. Without second thought, he stepped forward, moving with the speed of a panther.

His hand caught Meagre's wrist, deflecting the blow into space. The intended victim fell loose as Meagre went off balance. There was a crowd now, and Poke could see Jimmy coming down the street. Poke said quietly, "The man had enough."

Meagre roared, "You low-livered saddle bum, you can't butt into my affairs! That drunken fool drew on me."

Poke said, "He was out like a light. You can't hit a man when he's out."

"Take your dirty hand off me, you fool!" Meagre roared. His face was hard now, but the red had receded from it. Into the greenish-hazel eyes had come calculation. Poke was immobile, throwing loose the bigger man's wrist, stepping back.

Meagre turned suddenly, thrusting people away from the fallen man. It was a scrawny, tattered figure that lay on the ground. Meagre's boot went back and he cried, "I'll stave in his ribs!"

Poke sighed. Meagre was smart, all right. He was determined to put Poke in the wrong by making him butt in.

Poke stepped forward and grabbed, this time getting Meagre's shoulder. He said thinly, "It's personal, now. You can make your play, Meagre!"

OUT OF the door of another saloon poured five men. They came running, and they were all Bar X riders. The leader yelled, "Comin', Boss!"

Poke said, "Fill your hand, Meagre!"

Young Jimmy's hand sloped down, came up filled with his .45 as he turned and faced the oncoming quintet. His voice was steady. "Hold it, Lanny! This here's a private fight, my man against your boss."

Meagre's aplomb returned. He said, "Now, wait a minute. Hold everything, everybody." He managed a smile. "Mebbe I was a little hasty, Poke. You shouldn't a grabbed me, but mebbe I shouldn't have called you names. . . . I don't want young Jimmy in any shootout. Guess we better call this off and have a drink." He made an expansive gesture, including all within hearing. "Step up and name it."

Men came, swaggering now to cover their fear of a moment before. They paid no heed to Poke. They followed the big form of Drake Meagre into the Lone Pine.

Jimmy was staring at Poke. He said, "I never drew before—on men."

"It's all right," said Poke quickly. "You did fine. Thanks for siding me, Jimmy."

The boy said slowly, "You and me are—we work together."

Poke said, "Sure! Let's tote this character some place, huh?"

Jimmy and Poke supported the semi-conscious form of Catfish Jones between them, staggering down the street to the sheriff's office. Zeke Castle came out and opened the door to the sturdy, one-celled jail. He said, "Fight was over afore I could get there. Glad there was no shootin'. Put Catfish in his regular corner, gents."

The man was skin and bones. Jimmy retreated from the foul whiskey odor, but Poke laid Catfish out in the corner upon a pallet and bent close to him. He asked, "Why did you cross Meagre?"

The bruised lips opened, but no sound came out. Catfish's eyes were opaque, then slowly came to life. He said, "Whiskey, stranger. Jest whiskey."

Poke said, "Tell me why you did it!"

The head shook wearily to and fro upon the blanket. "I'm an old whiskey head. Oughter be ashamed. Useta work. Worked for Meagre, one time. . . ." One eye became very bright. The other was discolored and almost closed by Meagre's

fists. Catfish said in a whisper, "Nobody ever beat me afore. Might work agin, fer the right man."

Poke said, "Report Monday to the J. B. Come clean and sober."

He went into Castle's office. He said, "I'll pay the fine. Here's twenty to outfit him."

The sheriff said, "No fine. Catfish is all right. You hirin' him?"

"Yeah," said Poke. "For Jimmy."

Castle nodded. He seemed half asleep in his chair, his plump hands folded on his belly. "You go see Jimmy. He ain't happy. Grant and Meagre are closer'n thieves since Big Jim got killed. About run the bank."

Poke sucked in his breath. He said, "The old squeeze play. . . . Thanks, Zeke."

He went down to the hotel. Jimmy was in the buckboard, waiting, his lips tight. Poke climbed aboard and the bays lunged for home, straining every strap of harness.

They were almost to the ranch before Jimmy spoke. "Grant turned me down. Said we were sort of one-horse to have a loan. Wanted to call the mortgage."

Poke said, "I got a hand for us. He won't cost anything."

Jimmy said, "The store gave me credit. . . . You hire Catfish?"

"Yeah," said Poke.

Jimmy considered. Then he said, "He was foreman for Meagre. He got run off for boozin'. But he's a good hand, sober."

CHAPTER

3

Drygulch Strategy

Poke rode down an arroyo, scanning the brush for a certain white-faced stray of the Hereford strain which he had missed from the small herd.

Catfish was over to the south, working the ridges. Jimmy was east, nearest the ranch, and Brownie was cooking the noon meal at the tiny chuck wagon. Poke saw movement on the rim of the arroyo, a glint of something brown moving in the sun. He bent low, clucking to his horse.

The rifle cracked as he bent his head. The bullet singed his black hair. He flung himself from the saddle and lit rolling.

Then he was crawling on his belly, dragging his toes. He had luck enough to find three rocks lying loose in a heap, and he

got behind them with the greatest of dispatch. The horse was running, doubling back for the ranch, and Poke's rifle was in its scabbard.

The sun burned hotly and a curious horned toad came out and stared unwinkingly at Poke. Time went by. Atop the edge of the arroyo all movement had ceased. The bushwhacker was cautious. Or perhaps he had Indian blood. Poke eased his position.

After a long time he decided to move. He retreated along the side of the slope, finding cover as best he could.

No shot followed him. He trudged back down into the arroyo and up the other side. He came to the spot from which the shot had been sent. He stood staring at ground carefully dragged with brush, the tracks spoiled. There was no tell-tale cartridge, nothing.

It was bad to be afoot five miles from the chuck wagon in this sun. He began walking northward. From the top of the next incline he could see the Bar X building scarcely a mile below. He grinned to himself and limped on. The boots were killing him, but he was not adverse to visiting with Drake Meagre.

There were no riders at the Bar X. Poke walked up the steps and hallooed, "Anybody home?"

Inside a man called, "Light and set."

Poke walked into the cool of the house. It was dim, coming from the sunlight, but he made out Drake Meagre in an easy chair, one foot on a stool. Poke said, "Well! Laid up, huh, Meagre?"

"Stepped in a prairie-dog hole," said the big man without rancour. "I didn't hear your hoss. You get throwed?"

"And drug," nodded Poke gravely, indicating the rents in his work clothes. "Thought I'd borrow a cayuse."

Meagre said without reserve, "Glad to oblige. We threw a couple of head of Jimmy's over your line yesterday. You find 'em?"

"Yeah," said Poke. They were polite, but between them was a drawn gun and both knew it. "Sorry you're laid up at this time, Meagre. I'll just help myself."

Meagre waved a big hand. "I'll be out tomorrow. Just givin' it a rest. Take the pinto, he's a good one."

Poke nodded.

He went out to the corral. The pinto was easy to catch up, and was certainly a good work horse. Poke found a saddle and bridle and took his time adjusting straps, still using his eyes and his head. There were three other horses in the cavity, but none had been ridden that day.

He mounted the pinto, took the buck out of him. He was near the barn when the horse finally was satisfied, which was what Poke had planned. He looked inside. There was a horse in the far stall.

Meagre, propped on a stick, called, "Well, see you later, Poke." The big man was at the back of the house and now there was a rifle leaning against the wall.

Poke said carelessly, "Sure enough." He rode past the leaning man, grinning.

Meagre's expression did not change. Poke went on and crossed the Bar X line. Something bright gleamed at its exact edge; he dismounted and picked up a spent shell. It lay in the shade of a bush where it had been carelessly thrown. Poke slipped it into his pants pocket and remounted. He discovered the white-face almost at once and chivvied the creature down on the plain. Brownie, trying to cook and hold the cattle all at one time, was grouchy.

Jimmy came in sweating with eight head and said, "That's about them."

"Where's Catfish?" asked Poke.

"Should be in by now," said Jimmy. "He was down in the gulch when I saw him last."

Poke said, "I better look."

He found his own horse on the line and turned the pinto loose to go home. He rode to the south. There was a plain trail of the sorrel Catfish had been riding, which was shod front and not rear. The hills became rough and Poke's cayuse picked his way with canny unconcern. And then for the second time that day there was the sound of a rifle, flatly echoing in the hills.

Poke spurred the pony. They went helter-skelter among the loose rocks and Poke drew the carbine from his saddle. His face was hard and his chin jutted. He came to the top of the highest rise of the foothills and reined in.

He saw a puff of smoke to his right. He dismounted and crept forward, gaining shelter behind a large boulder. He sighted down the barrel of the carbine, waiting. A man started to change his position, trailing

his gun. It was Lanny, the Bar X foreman.

Poke waited. To the south a shot whined through the air. A shrill voice yelled, "Damn you, Lanny, come and get it!"

Two other rifles rang out. Catfish cursed and Poke knew his man was hit. Immediately he threw down on the spot where Lanny had flattened himself. He pressed the trigger, threw the bolt and waited with the gun cocked. His first shot missed, as he had expected, but Lanny was surprised. He made a move, trying to gain cover against this crossfire. Poke shot again, aiming to lead the foreman as he ran. Bullet and man came together. Lanny yelled, threw out his arms and toppled off the hill, rolling down to the swift-moving river below.

Catfish howled, "Come in, boys! They're over yonder!"

POKE was already running. Ten yards away he knelt and fired again. There was motion in the break and someone said, "They're comin' in! They got Lanny!"

Then there was crashing, while Poke emptied his gun from as many different positions as he could assume at top speed, making himself appear a posse of men. After that came silence.

Poke reloaded, hurrying to where he had heard Catfish's voice.

The emaciated man had filled out some since coming to the J B, but he was still gaunt, and the blood upon his shoulder did not enhance his appearance. He lay against a tree and said, "I ain't in shape to stand this, Poke. Them devils got me just as you got here."

Poke made a bandage of his undershirt and laid it against the gaping hole in the shoulder. It was a nasty wound, too low, too close to the lung. He said, "I'll catch your horse."

"Fust I better tell you," said Catfish. "I was on the road the night Jim Beck got his'n. I was drunk and ridin' back to the Bar X. I was foreman for Meagre then."

Poke said, "You saw Jim killed?"

Catfish shook his head, "I was drunk. But I heard the shot. And I seen Meagre on the road. He never said nothin' to me about it. I kept shut, as Leb seemed guilty to me and everybody else hereabouts. But then Meagre fired me. And then when I

said somethin' about Big Jim in the bar, he cursed me and I drew on him, only I was drunk agin."

Poke said, "What did you say about Big Jim that made Meagre so mad?"

Catfish drew a deep breath, grimacing with pain. "I happened to hear young Jimmy didn't get no loan. I reminded Meagre how Big Jim had put Meagre in the bank himself—and lived to regret it." Catfish sighed and muttered, "You better ketch that hoss. I'm runnin' low."

Poke cursed himself for palavering with a sick man and caught the horse. Catfish kept his mouth shut all the torturous way to the chuck wagon. When he opened it, blood ran out.

Brownie was as good as a doctor. Men seldom recovered from bad gunshot wounds on the range, but Brownie would not give up. Catfish lapsed into delirium, and Poke had to ride the herd with Jimmy, turn and turn about, while Brownie crouched over the incoherent man and days went by.

Finally Poke said, "It's no good. We're losing time and the herd's got to be branded. I'm ridin', Jimmy."

"Where to?" asked the youth. He was dead beat, but he had never complained. He wore a pearl-handled gun now, a beautiful weapon which Poke had never seen before Catfish's accident. "Looks like Meagre may jump us. I can't understand why we haven't heard from him if he's so anxious to hurt us."

"Meagre is smart as an Apache," said Poke. "He plays a hit and run game. He's got patience with his brains. I'm ridin' for Mary Gordon."

Jimmy said, "You think she can help?"

Poke said, "Hold the fort, Jimmy. I'll let you know."

He went south on a fresh mount, going fast. The next morning he slid into the yard of the T Z on a fagged horse. As he got stiffly down, Mary Gordon came to meet him.

She said, "It's not the time I thought you would visit, but you're welcome, Poke."

"It's not pleasure," said Poke. "Catfish is hurt and we can't hold the herd. I need a couple men, if you're finished with the brandin'."

"How bad is Catfish?" she asked.

"Shot through the lung," said Poke.

Her eyes clouded. He waited, knowing she was thinking rapidly, that at last she was frightened into full consideration of the war which was going on in Apache Valley, the sneaking, undercover warfare in which her own interests were completely involved. She said softly, "Was it—Drake?"

"His men. I shot Lanny."

She nodded. "I was afraid. Let's hurry, Poke."

She called and two cowboys, One Eye and Musty Joe, appeared from the bunkhouse. They saddled three horses and rode north. Mary rode at Poke's side without words, but he felt the full spirit of her friendliness and cooperation.

He said, "What about that fancy gun young Jimmy wears?"

Mary started. She said sharply, "Is he wearing Big Jim's gun?"

"Is that it? Yeah, he's wearing it."

"Then he's ready to meet Big Jim's real killer!" Mary said decisively. "And Leb Bramwell is still in jail."

"I agree with you," said Poke. "Bramwell never did it."

"Young Jimmy knows!" she cried. "Let's hurry!"

They rode faster, into the noon sun, going over the country on their mission to help out the J B.

CHAPTER

4

Big Jim's Gun

Poke was suddenly in a driving hurry. The two T Z hands were expert, herding the cattle down to the J B branding pens. Jimmy had been silent. He still wore the pearl-handled .44 as he moved about his chores in the camp, but Poke sensed that the boy was brooding.

As soon as the cattle were safe, Poke changed clothing, dousing himself with buckets of water and slicking back his too-long hair. He caught a fresh horse and admonished Musty Joe and One Eye to hold the ranch. Then he spurred toward Walnut City. It was dusk when he pulled up at the sheriff's office.

There were four Bar X horses at the rail before the Lone Pine. Poke swung down and strode into the sheriff's office.

The fat sheriff was still in his chair. He

tapped a stiff document against his teeth and said:

"Howdy, Poke. Hear you've been havin' a bit of trouble."

"You learn a lot without moving from that chair," Poke grinned. "Now what do you know about a man named Grant, over at the bank?"

"Grant took a trip on yesterday's train. Said he was goin' down El Paso way to see his sister." The sheriff spread the paper on his desk. "This here's a warrant, sworn to by three men. It's for your arrest, Poke."

"Ah!" said Poke. "Lanny, eh?"

Castle nodded. "Guess you got him, all right. This here is made in the name of Poke Bramwell."

Poke drew in his breath. "Meagre knows who I am?"

"He's been sendin' telygraphs to Arizona," said Castle.

Poke said, "You goin' to serve the warrant?"

"If I don't, there'll be a shootin'."

Poke said, "I'm safe in your jail?"

"Natcherly," Castle shrugged. "On'y way I kin keep you safe is in the jail."

Poke drew his revolver and laid it on the battered desk. He said, "Will you take a look at Grant's papers? You're on the director's board of the bank. There's got to be a reason for Big Jim's murder."

Castle scrambled in his desk and produced keys which he tossed to Poke. "Lock yourself up. You know, I never thought much of Grant. He's sich a pussycat. Grant, Meagre and Big Jim. They were friends."

Poke said, "I'm just a jailbird. You figure it out, then turn me loose with my gun."

Zeke Castle sighed. "Looks like I got to stir myself. Wish I could lose a little of this weight!" He got up and took Poke's gun and put it in an ancient safe. He settled his hat more firmly and said, "I'll jest look in the bank now."

The bank was just across the street. Poke went into the lone cell, unlocking the door, throwing the keys on Castle's desk and slamming the catch behind him, effectually putting himself in durance vile.

He chuckled, stretching on the bed. . . .

A rough hand shook him awake. He leaped to his feet and the light of a lamp

COWBOY FROM HELL

blinded him, but not before he had seen the drawn guns. Meagre's harsh voice was saying:

"Come out and be hanged, you murderer and murderer's brother!"

THE Bar X men were there beside him, silent, hard-faced men. Orrey from the store hovered in the background, his weak face contorted with conflicting emotions. Behind Meagre, in Castle's office, the sheriff writhed in ropes which encircled him. A man held another rope.

Castle shouted, "They got me by surprise, Poke! In the bank!"

"Robbin' us!" said a man. "Castle and this hombre are pardners!"

Meagre said, "We'll hang Castle too. This town needs a final cleanin'. We want Texas justice!"

He was smart enough to strike the correct note, always, Poke thought. Someone gave vent to a rebel yell and others took it up. It was a fine incitement to the mob spirit. Meagre's men grasped him and he was out in the cool night air, seven guns trained upon him.

Meagre harangued the crowd, "This man is Leb Bramwell's brother! He killed Lanny and tried to kill Coe and Dunn and Frey. Now he and the sheriff, your elected representative, are conspirin' to rob our bank!"

The growl went around the Walnut Bend crowd. There was a cottonwood tree which had been used before in earlier, wilder days. They were rushing Poke along toward it. Someone yanked his hands behind him and tied them together.

Meagre shouted, "We'll come back and get Castle next!"

Then the riders came in. There were only two of them, but the crowd parted to let them through. The cry went up, "Jimmy! It's Bramwell's brother!"

Young Jimmy rode straight in the saddle, Brownie beside him. Meagre stood with outstretched hand, "Just in time, Jimmy. We got him. He was tryin' to rob you, too."

"Yeah," said a man. "He's a snake!"

The hullabaloo went on. Jimmy was wearing his father's gun, Poke saw. He met the eyes of the young man even as they dropped the rope over his neck.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Jimmy came forward, and behind him,
stooped, wearing two old seven-inch Colts
which seemed to drag on the ground, came
Brownie. When he was facing Poke, two
steps away, Jimmy paused. Brownie came
on, and stood closer to Poke, Jimmy said:

"I swore to get any Bramwell who came
within reach. I swore to get Leb when he
came from the pen. I was swearing to get
the breed which killed Big Jim. I mean to
do it!"

Poke said very clearly, "Well, why don't
you get him then, Jimmy?"

Jimmy said, "I will!"

He swung about. Brownie, moving with
incredible speed, whipped out a bowie knife
big enough to slice the head off a steer.
The ropes which bound Poke fell loose.
One of the big Colts came out and found
its way into Poke's hand. He leaped away
from Brownie and the two of them covered
the crowd.

Jimmy said flatly and coldly, "Fill your
hand, Drake!"

The Bar X men scattered, but the crowd
engulfed them for the moment. One got
a weapon loose, but Poke crashed a slug
into him as the mob broke and scurried for
safety.

Drake Meagre, pale, then red, roared
with rage. His big hand went down. He
was swift with it, swift as a gunslinger of
experience can be.

The boy dipped his thin body. His big
hand went down, found the pearl butt of
Big Jim's gun. It leaped out, jabbed for-
ward. Jimmy's left hand swept, fanning,
and Poke, even in the stress of the event,
knew that fanning was a stunt learned not
from Big Jim but from Poke Bramwell.

The shots banged together, flatly, echo-
ing in the dusty air of Walnut Bend. Jim-
my stood like a sapling, bending a little,
swaying. Meagre seemed unhurt, but his
mouth opened and no sound came.

Then Meagre put his two hands to his
middle, as though holding himself togeth-
er by main strength, and walked to the
boards of the sidewalk. He sat down, pain-
fully, retching.

A fussy little doctor came running with
a brown bag. Jimmy was staring down at
his father's gun, which now lay in the
street. His right arm hung useless.

Brownie leaped fiercely to his side, growl-

COWBOY FROM HELL

ing at the doctor, "Tend to that beef on the walk. I'll handle this lil' ole flesh wound!"

The doctor tried to stretch Meagre upon the walk, but the big man shook his head. He looked up at Poke and said, "I played it too close."

Poke said, "Catfish was your mistake. Catfish tipped me on the bank business."

"I should have killed him," said Meagre calmly. "How did you know I didn't have a sore foot that day?"

"The horse in the stable was saddled," said Poke. "Your rifle was a .44. I found a .44 shell and horse tracks from the stable, right fresh. Anyway, it had to be you. You are the killer kind."

"I was," amended the big man. His face was gray, now. "I killed Big Jim. I ordered Catfish shot. I did it all. I stole the money from the bank and Big Jim found it out. . . I admit it all. I want to die clean. . . Will you take off my boots, Doc?"

They removed his boots in the time-honored custom and they watched Drake Meagre die.

Young Jimmy was waiting in the Lone Pine, a bandage on his arm. He said, "I knew you right away, Poke. I knew you were a Bramwell from the start. You look like Leb too much. I was waitin' to learn your game."

Poke said, "You're a great boy."

Jimmy drank his whiskey without blinking. "Mary told me you had to be right. Said she knew it by lookin' at you. I rattled with myself some, Poke. You meb-be thought I was crazy. . ."

Poke said, "Leb don't belong in jail. He's wild, but he's a good kid. He always was good to Mom."

Jimmy nodded. "You'll be goin' up to get him. Would you come back and work with me?"

Sheriff Castle waddled in. He said, "I'm plumb ashamed. They took me in the bank like I was a baby. Lynchin' was the only way for them after I seen those papers. . . There's a mortgage on the Bar X. Belonged to Big Jim. Seems he won it in a two-handed game with Drake, the night he was killed. Grant was holdin' it over Drake, aimin' to be a pardner. But Meagre scared Grant outa town."

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Jimmy said, "You could run the Bar X for me, Poke! Please!"

Poke grinned. "I got to ride now. But not to the pen. I got to ride out to see Catfish."

Jimmy said, "Catfish came to and told us about things. That's why we rode in. But you ain't in such a sweat to see only Catfish!"

Poke said, "I got to thank Mary for sidin' me, don't I?"

Jimmy sighed unhappily. "First Meagre, now you. Well, reckon I couldn't grow up to her soon enough anyway. Damn you, Poke, go ahead. Ride!"

THE END

(Continued from page 64)

ing from him and his horse was reeling from a long arrow buried in the flank, but they swept him on through, up the rise among the dead, and let him slip from his saddle at the edge of the circled freighter wagons. It seemed ages before he heard himself speaking.

"My wagons!" he gasped. "In the bottoms of the beds!"

"We know, Whittle." Seldon's voice came from somewhere. "Ellen told me the second day. She told me about Brown and Dutton, too. Seems that all you people who come out here to open a store want to bring guns and cartridges to trade to the Indians. Everybody's using those guns and cartridges now, Whittle. They're helping us win this thing."

He turned his head, looking for Anna. She sat beside a big wagon looking at him calmly, waiting for the inevitable. Elmer Whittle closed his eyes. Lying there on his back he heard the thundering of the guns, smelled gunsmoke and blood in the heavy air as the last attack was driven off.

It was the set-up for a real standoff now, good for a week or ten days if the Indians were fools enough to try again. Settler wagons were jammed tightly in a big half-moon against the freighter wagons. Fires in the latter had been put out with water from the creek below, and Indians now had to keep their distance, knowing it was only death to get within rifle range. By nothing short of a miracle, Seldon had come through with less than a dozen wounded, eight horses and mules dying, six oxen down.

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Smoke signals went up rapidly from a far peak and seemed suddenly to decide everything. Indians wheeled their ponies, heeling them, slashing them with rawhide quirts. All at once they were fleeing in every direction, as a wild cheer lifted from the settlers.

Elmer Whittle opened his eyes and looked at Anna again. She was on her feet, staring westward. He let his eyes roll, and saw that many others were staring in that direction. It seemed a long, long time before he heard something, a faint sound in the far distance, brassy-sharp.

"Anna!"

"Yes, Elmer." She dropped to her knees beside him. "It's soldiers from somewhere. Coming now, they say, after there is no need for them. Seems that the freighter people sent out two or three men—"

"What," he broke in with a scowl, "is Ellen doing?"

"Helping Phil with the wounded, Elmer."

"So you now call him Phil!" He closed his eyes tightly for a moment. "All right, Anna. I hope you'll know how to manage things—the money that's left, I mean." He choked suddenly, coughed violently, and looked up to see Anna mopping a gush of red from his lips. "Phil Seldon said we'd drink the devil's blood. Queer," he tried to smile, "I never thought it was—mine he was—talking about."

A bugle called, called, and kept calling in the west. Another started singing in the north. Faint and far, a third lifted its whistling notes to southward. Elmer Whittle did not hear them. He was looking straight up at the sky, eyes big, round and shining.

All around him people were leaping, dancing, shouting. Even Anna was back on her feet. Phil Seldon came from somewhere, his arm around the laughing, crying Ellen Queen. He threw a long arm around Anna, hugging him to her on one side, Ellen on the other. Elmer Whittle continued to stare at the sky, unseeing.

THE END

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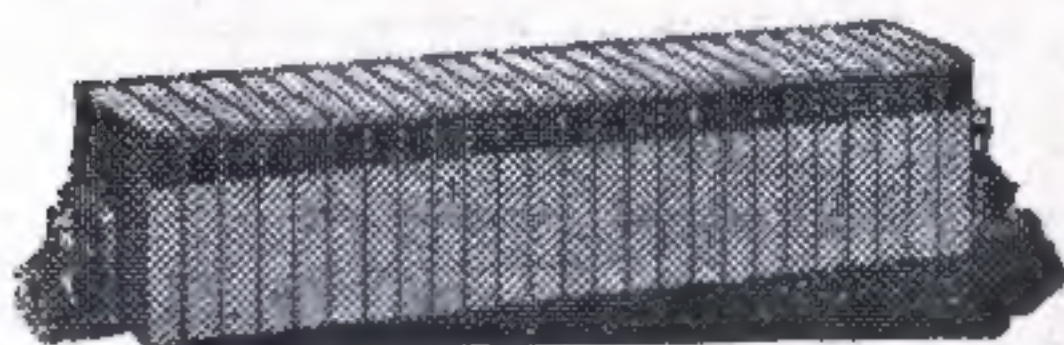
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